

Occasions
towards the appreciation
of several arts

by W. B. HONEY

Mr. Honey's essays deal not only with the visual arts, of painting, sculpture, pottery and glass, gardening and the ballet, but touch at length on poetry and even attempt to establish the difficult relationship between beauty in art and beauty in nature. He finds the essential creative element in every work of art to be independent of its occasion, that is to say, its subject matter or practical purpose. A grasp of this distinction will, it is contended, clear up many fallacies and confusions in criticism and appreciation.

With 20 pages of plates

KANSAS CITY, MO. PUBLIC LIBRARY



0 0001 450226 1

704 H77m

66-10059

704 H77m

66-10059

Honey

Many occasions

MAIN



Books will be issued only
on presentation of library card.
Please report lost cards and
change of residence promptly.
Card holders are responsible for
all books, records, films, pictures
or other library materials
checked out on their cards.

MANY OCCASIONS

DATE: 11/11/68

[illegible]

by the same author

★

THE ART OF THE POTTER
THE CERAMIC ART OF CHINA
ENGLISH POTTERY OLD AND NEW
GLASS: A HANDBOOK

★

SCIENCE AND THE CREATIVE ARTS
THE SACRED FIRE: AN ANTHOLOGY OF ENGLISH POEMS
GARDENING HERESIES AND DEVOTIONS

★

NATURE, GOD AND MAN: A PAMPHLET

★

BROUGHT OUT IN EVIDENCE: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY
(*by 'William Bowyer'*)

MANY OCCASIONS

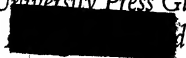
*Essays
towards the appreciation
of several arts*

by
W. B. HONEY

FABER AND FABER LIMITED

24 Russell Square
London

*First published in mcmxlix
by Faber and Faber Limited
24 Russell Square London W.C. 1
Printed in Great Britain by
R. MacLehose and Company Limited
The University Press Glasgow*



To
CHARLES MARRIOTT

KANSAS CITY (MO.) PUBLIC LIBRARY
6610059

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	<i>page 7</i>
I. INTRODUCTION: Many Occasions	13
II. BEAUTY IN ART AND NATURE	21
III. POETRY	31
The Sacred Fire: an essay on the nature and phases of English poetry	
IV. THE ARTS IN THE MODERN WORLD	
1. The artist and his subjects	97
2. The artist and his materials	102
3. The artist and society	106
4. The artist as visionary	110
V. VISUAL ARTS	
1. Art and science	117
2. The painter's purpose and the public taste	120
3. Sculpture and modelling	122
4. A porcelain group	124
5. Tradition and change in the art of the potter	128
6. The art of the glass-maker: a survey	134
VI. THE THEATRE	143
A note on Nijinsky and the paradox of acting and dancing	
VII. THE GARDEN	151
End of the year	

ILLUSTRATIONS

NATURAL FORMS	<i>following page 24</i>
Brazilian beetle	
<i>Dreikanter</i> (pebble)	
Mountains	
Shells	
Sea-slug	
GRAPHIC ART	96
Etching by Pablo Picasso	
Painting by Giovanni Bellini	
Wood-engraving by Eric Ravilious	
Drawing by Hans Bellmer	
PLASTIC AND GLYPTIC ART	120
Porcelain group by Franz Anton Bustelli	
Carving by Henry Moore	
Terracotta by Arnold Machin	
POTTERY AND GLASS	136
Stoneware vase by Bernard Leach	
Glass vase by Viktor Lindstrand (Orrefors)	
Glass dish by Tom Hill (Whitefriars)	
Cream-coloured earthenware jug designed by Keith Murray (Wedgwood)	
NATURAL FORMS AND A DRAWING	144
Iris flower	
Fritillary flower	
Japanese drawing	
Human body	

I

INTRODUCTION

MANY OCCASIONS

Much of the misunderstanding that prevails regarding works of art and their significance arises, I am convinced, from a confusion between the art and its occasion, between the form imparted to the object by the creative gift the artist exercises, and whatever subject-matter or function or rational purpose it may have. The latter may be discussed; its relation to the life and thought of its time may be established; or the efficiency with which it performs its function may be ascertained. But the formal¹ qualities it may be given by the genius of the man who made it are scarcely susceptible of analysis, still less of rational discussion. The critic's easiest course is therefore to concentrate on the first of these aspects, ignoring the fact that a work may have human or literary or intellectual interest without having aesthetic merit at all. It cannot be assumed that there is some esoteric connection between the formal qualities and the genesis of the work in human experience, while greatness as a man in thought or character is no guarantee of greatness as an artist. The problem is too often obscured by a lack in the mind of the observer of a clear distinction between *form* and *occasion*, as the two aspects may be conveniently named. But a definition of the essential character of a work of art is plainly needed at the outset.

A work of art, then, in its essence, may be regarded as a complex of forms, created in terms of a medium or material, which has the power to move or enchant or delight us in a certain way. The medium may be (for example) paint or

¹ I use the word 'formal' here and elsewhere as the adjective derived from 'form', not of course in the sense of formality.

Many Occasions

stone or words or sounds or the movements of the human body. Art is not, essentially, a copy of something else, though often supposed to be by those who lack the necessary aesthetic sensibility to perceive and judge formal excellence. It is not a copy of the appearance of things (of flesh and blood, for example) made in such other materials as clay and marble. It is not, essentially, an interpretation of character or a rendering of the inner life of a subject or the revelation of ideal existence or the embodiment of spiritual being conceived or known apart from its material; it has its own ideal or spiritual existence. It is not to be valued, as a work of art, for its rendering of human emotion or expression. Nor does verse become poetry on account of the meaning or message or emotion or observation it may express; it must convey the verbal enchantment which is the mark of creative power in that particular medium. Though we may speak of the artist's vision or imagination or invention we mean by the word his power to create personal forms, peculiar to his work, not the order of imagination or fancy of one who (for example) has seen, or says he has seen, fairies. Above all, art is not the translation indifferently into one material or another of some theme or subject declared to be beautiful or poetical in nature or thought. It is created in one material and is inseparable from it. It may be of interest or valuable on these irrelevant accounts, but as a work of art it must be beautiful in itself, in its own right.

The elements of the formal appeal of a work of art may sometimes be distinguished and named, as composition, pattern, texture (including the mere quality of paint, the painter's 'handwriting'), and the surface quality of carved stone; linear and other rhythm; significant or creative line (which makes good drawing as distinct from accurate representational drawing); creative harmony or contrast of colour, and counterpoint not only of sounds but of forms and words or phrases. Added to these are elements drawn from associa-

Many Occasions

tions, such as emotional colour with its vibrations and overtones. None of these names, of course, defines good or great art (though about it there is a consensus of informed opinion), while such adjectives as vital, opposed to empty, facile and mannered, are scarcely more decisive.

Now since the abstract elements thus indicated are essential to works of art as such, it has in recent years been thought that painting could (or even should) make use of these elements alone, in abstract compositions and 'pure' poetry, and the case of absolute music, which is all form without separable content, has been cited as a justifying parallel. Painting as visual music and pottery as abstract sculpture (for example) have been claimed for this theory.

But though the theory is plausible, in practice it has been found to lead to a result which many people find meagre and unsatisfying, like synthetic food which from its lack of organic 'impurities' somehow fails to nourish us. It seems as if an indirect approach is the more fruitful, one by which beauty is achieved incidentally, even unconsciously. The craftsman needs a practical problem and purpose, the painter the excitement of visual experience, the poet the stimulus of some emotion, to set free his creative gift. To seek a short cut is a vain pursuit. It is as if (in the words of Robert Frost) a poet had observed that wildness is characteristic of some poetry, therefore 'we will have the wildness pure', and 'be wild with nothing to be wild about'.

Yet though abstract art may fail to satisfy, it remains true that it is on account of abstract elements such as I have indicated that a work of art is valued, and the distinction between the aesthetic appeal of its form, and the human interest that occasions it, is fundamental and usefully borne in mind.

The theory of necessary occasions thus explained helps to clarify several other much-discussed problems in aesthetics. Though 'art for art's sake' is no longer a battle-cry, its spirit

Many Occasions

survives to inspire those artists who resist the attempt to require of them a social function; to fulfil a useful purpose is all the art their enemies will allow them. 'Art for humanity's sake' has become the slogan of the opposition, condemning the dilettantism and triviality of a merely 'decorative' art. In the light of the theory of occasions, the dispute may appear, to the onlooker, unnecessary, since the urgent human concerns may provide the occasion of work whose formal excellence may be all the greater for not being directly sought. Again, the distinction between Classical and Romantic art, so much laboured at the present time, with so little precision in the definition of the terms, may often prove to be no more than a dispute over subject-matter, disregarding the possibility that both varieties alike may be the occasion of formal excellence. On the other hand, the distinction drawn by the late T. E. Hulme between Humanist and Classical art refers chiefly to the greater stress laid in the one on human, that is to say non-formal values (as in most Greco-Roman and much Renaissance art), than in the more stylized work in the other, as in the art of some primitive peoples and their more self-conscious modern followers. Again it frequently happens, especially in the so-called fine arts, that new and revolutionary techniques become the occasion of creative work. To take up *'pointillisme'* or 'direct carving' did not necessarily enable a man to achieve aesthetic merit, but the excitement they aroused may have set free a latent gift. New sorts of fidelity in the mere rendering of the appearance of nature may have a similar result, as in the case of the Pre-Raphaelites. Surrealism may put at the disposal of the artist a whole new world of exciting subjects; but the merit of a surrealist drawing depends not on the accuracy or interest of its report of the unconscious, but on the creative imagination of the artist, on his command of a purely linear fantasy.

In the historical succession of 'styles' or movements, in music and poetry as well as in the visual arts, the formal

Many Occasions

characters revealed, though often associated in time with movements in the spiritual life of a people, have no necessary connection with them. These affect subject-matter or occasion only. The formal character of the style is determined by other forces, often very obscure though sometimes as obvious as mere reaction. Thus the Italian Baroque sculpture of the seventeenth century is only by an abuse of words described as a product of the Counter-Reformation, which used it, while there was no reason why the restless abstract Rococo of about 1740-65 should have appeared in the decorative art of that time; other contemporary arts show no such tendency; poetry inclined to a quiet, reposeful beauty, while in painting naturalism prevailed.

That there is no real connection between the greatness or seriousness of the occasion and the greatness of the art may well be argued. The latter must depend on the creative capacity of the artist. Yet the artist must be moved by experience and it may be that the more deeply moved he is the finer and more enduring will be his creation. A *Mass* by William Byrd or a painting of the Resurrection, *Paradise Lost* or a poem by Crashaw or Vaughan in this way should be 'greater' than *Christabel*, or *A Shropshire Lad*, or a painting of a brothel by Stanley Spencer; but this is by no means always so. The most we can say is that the visual and auditory forms are in such cases enriched exceptionally by the overtones of association, taking colour from their occasion. Here as in other matters it is useless to refer to the opinions of artists and poets themselves. Their evidence does not help; the processes of creation are so largely unconscious. To baffle us we have Coleridge's account of the composition of *Kubla Khan* and Housman's description of his haunting by a single line which gave him no rest until it had become a poem. It is all irrational, 'over the edge', on the far side of meaning. The mystery of form is such that the pattern of sounds or words or forms becomes a symbol with an inexplicable sig-

Many Occasions

nificance, moving and exalting us; and even the slightest work may achieve that miracle.

* * *

Now it is, I believe, useless to attempt to explain in words why one work of art is original and great, while another is facile, empty, derivative and scarcely deserving of the name. The power to appreciate and discriminate must come, if at all, from a long-continued process of adult self-education. To impart (in schools or elsewhere) the pre-digested consequences of other people's experience and taste can only produce an odious sham.

But the mind can at least be set free from prejudice and misconceptions; a latent sensibility to form and colour may be taught to abandon itself to their appeal. To try to do this has been my object in the essays that follow. They cover a wide field, and touch on many matters of aesthetic theory commonly disputed. Stress has been laid throughout on the significance of contemporary work, for this is the growing-point, and should focus our concern. Only by a care for modern art can a study of the past in my opinion be justified. Museum officials, with their antiquarian interests, too often tend to become mere parasites on the antique-dealing trade. We can be saved from this only by an interest in contemporary work, whose fostering is surely our gravest responsibility.

II

BEAUTY IN ART AND NATURE

BEAUTY IN ART AND NATURE

One of the fundamental problems of aesthetics concerns the relation between the natural objects called beautiful and the constructions of man in paint, stone, metal and the like, to which the same adjective is applied. The emotions aroused by both appear to be the same. Yet critics have quarrelled bitterly over the matter. At one extreme Mr. Clive Bell, discovering the essential element in works of art to be 'significant form', spoke of the 'insignificant beauty' of the butterfly and the human body, finding it sensual and not beauty at all. At the other extreme the opposing school finds the painter's art to consist of nothing but the faithful rendering of nature, the only source of beauty. Thus John Ruskin, unctuously defending the Pre-Raphaelites, urged the painter to 'go to Nature in all singleness of heart, and walk with her laboriously and trustingly . . . rejecting nothing, selecting nothing and scorning nothing; believing all things to be right and good, and rejoicing always in the truth'. Similar claims to have 'returned to nature' have often been made by painters in revolt against worn-out conventions; truth to perspective, truth to anatomy, truth to the colour of shadows and the character of light—all these have at different times moved the painter to create works of art whose aesthetic merit has fortunately not depended on these uncreative fidelities.

Now among the natural objects called beautiful two classes may readily be distinguished. On the one hand there are the plants and animals and other fellow-creatures of ours, the beauty of which is obviously of the same order as the beauty we attribute to the body of a man or woman; while on the

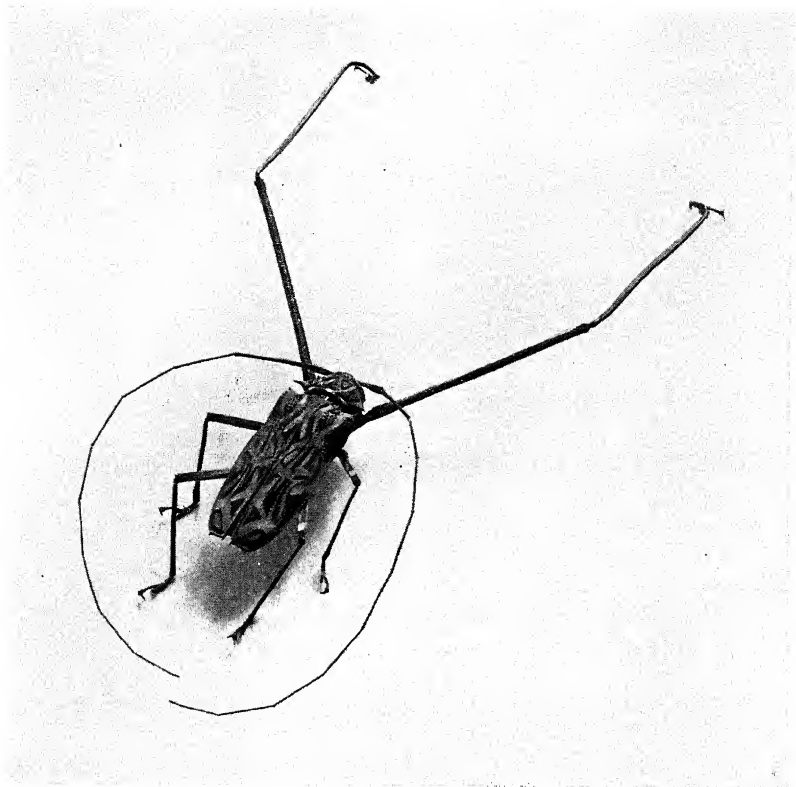
Beauty in Art and Nature

other hand there are the inorganic objects and scenes such as mountain and other landscapes, which are at some times, and by some people, found to be beautiful. In both cases the subjective element, always the crux in aesthetic criticism, is obviously important. Thus many creatures wonderfully contrived (such as insects and reptiles) may not appear beautiful unless regarded without fear, disinterestedly, and from the creature's own point of view, so to speak, while in the case of a landscape the beauty perceived clearly depends on the observer's capacity as a potential artist, and the quality of his emotion must vary with this capacity; he may prefer a natural picture full of sensational colours with confused detail charged with sentimental associations; or he may be moved by a system of related forms such as are found in paintings admittedly great.

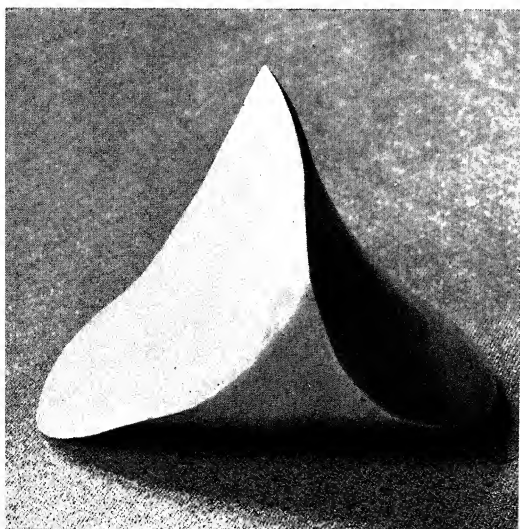
But an important difference between the two classes is to be noted. In the case of the landscapes the beauty can hardly be said to exist without the observer, but the beautiful creature is beautiful at all times and in itself; and the abstract patterns and rhythms and proportions and harmonies observable in its shape and colouring are like those in works of art in that they are created formal relations and clearly not the result of accident or a subjective state in the mind of the beholder.

This problem of the designs and patterns developed by living creatures and their relation to works of art was raised afresh in a book by Professor T. A. Stephenson on the inhabitants of the sea-shore.¹ Commenting on the creatures shown in his admirable drawings, one of which is reproduced here, he stressed the fact of pattern and pointed out some examples of astonishing beauty and complexity. He finds in all an underlying mathematics, and compares this to the patterns of 'decorative art', rather naively suggesting that 'even pictures' may have an underlying pattern in this sense. This of course recalls the ancient speculations con-

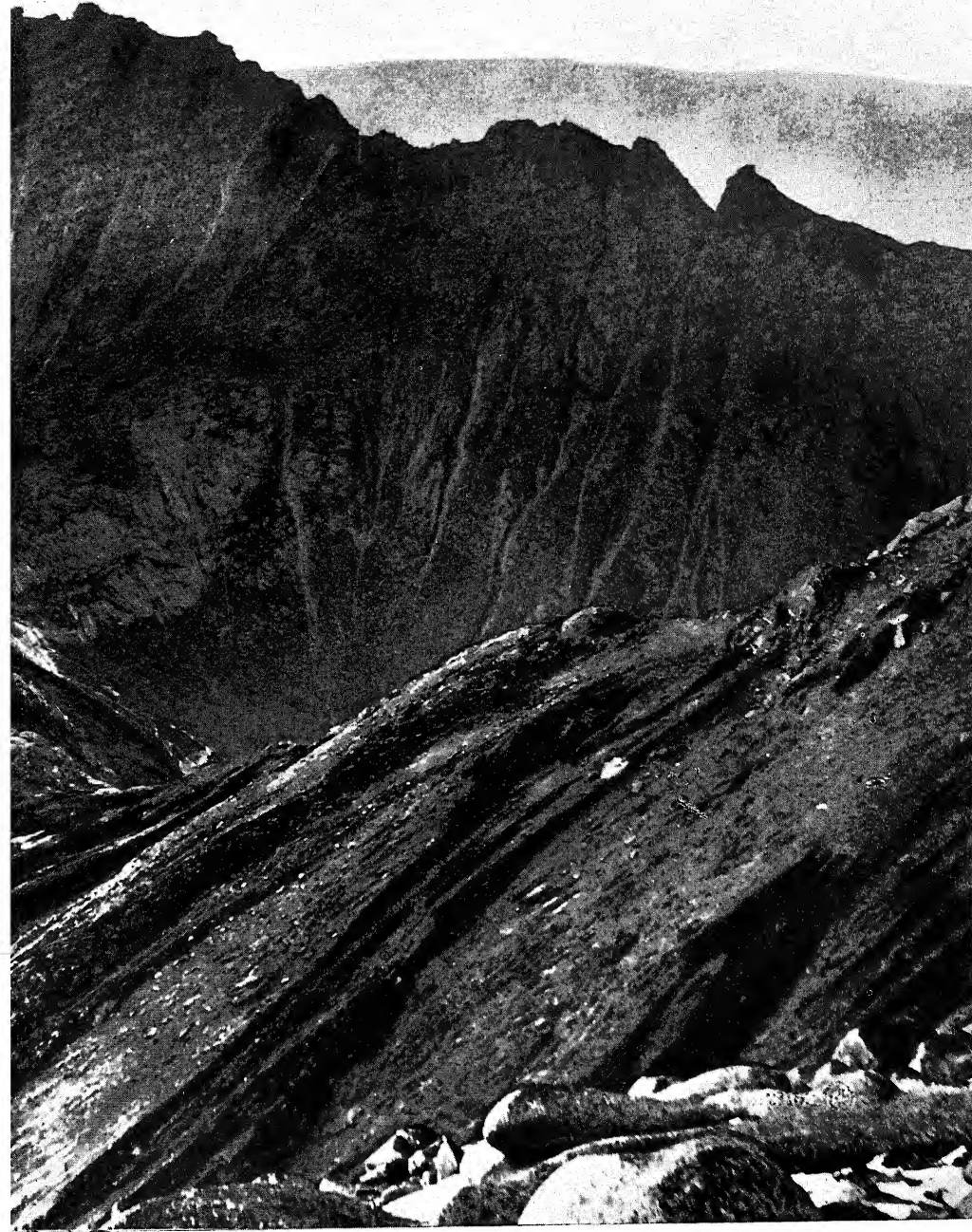
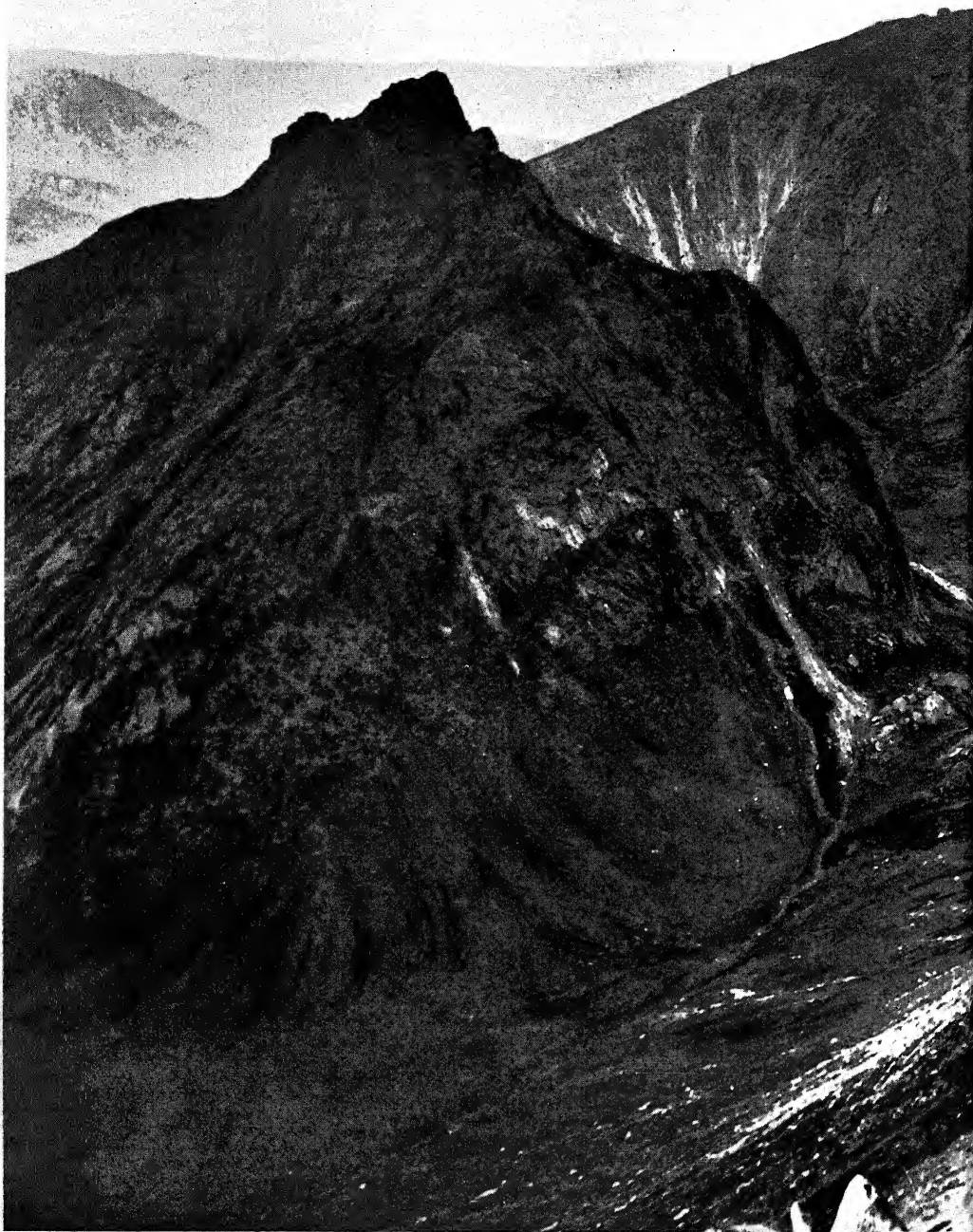
¹ *Seashore Life and Pattern* (King Penguin Books).

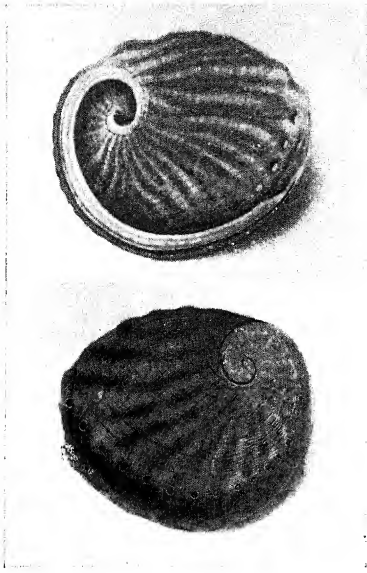


Brazilian beetle
(*Acrocinus longi-*
manus):
total length, 9 in.
Page 26

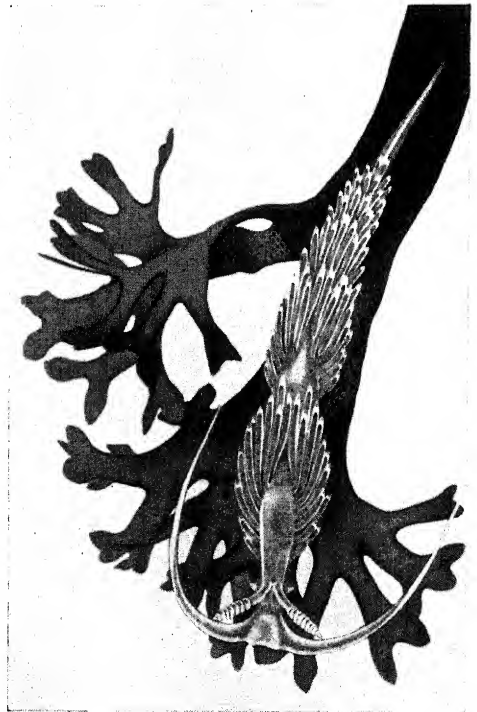


Dreikanter (wind-
worn pebble), from
the Terrace above the
Gulf of Suez:
height $2\frac{3}{8}$ in.
Page 29





Above, left: *Haliotis* shell,
from drawings by Thomas
Martyn (1789). Right:
Murex shell, from a drawing
by F. M. Regenfuss (1758).
Page 26



Sea-slug, from a drawing by
T. A. Stephenson, in
'Seashore Life and Pattern'
(King Penguin).
Page 25

Beauty in Art and Nature

cerning the Golden Section and the mathematical determination of all beautiful lines and proportions. But it must be said that while a numerical or mathematical framework may be traced in this way, the framework is not itself the design, any more than the metre is the poem. Ruskin put the point well when he said that 'all beautiful lines are drawn under mathematical laws organically transgressed', and it is of the essence of the organic that it is creative, not finally determined; there is a choice of proportions, of numbers, of accents, and the choice is itself creative. It is unforeseeable, in a word, living.

But though Professor Stephenson lays stress on this implied mathematics he admits that it is a matter of '*post mortem* analysis'. Though the framework and the principles are discoverable from a finished work they do not enable us to create another. That evidently requires some other gift or power.

In the case of the plants and animals it is, I understand, the usual scientific view that their beauty, as we call it, is the result of accidents accumulated by a process of natural or sexual selection; pattern must have a function in the life of the plant or animal. It is remarkable, however, that Professor Stephenson himself dissents from this view, declaring that 'there is far more in pattern than can be explained by any function of which we are aware'. How then does it come into existence? A work of art is made to satisfy the creative gift of an artist. 'Whose sense of pattern', then, asks Professor Stephenson, 'is satisfied by the creation of pattern in nature?' Who created the beauty of the lily and the sea-slug? The theologian of course would say, with the delusive finality which language implies, that the creature must have been made by a Creator. But would it not be more reasonable to suppose, bearing in mind the analogy of human works of art, that the creature made itself out of sheer creative fantasy?

Numberless examples come to mind of creatures whose

Beauty in Art and Nature

thrilling beauty irresistibly suggests the conception of an artist. Some are grave imaginings, austere and simple; others are riotous flights of fancy; some are almost vulgar, and there are so many cases of one creature imitating another of a totally different origin as to suggest to me a deliberate and entirely purposeless rivalry in artistic achievement. I think not only of the flamboyant obvious things—the butterflies and humming birds and flaunting poinsettias, but of such subtle linear fancies as the craneflies, the longicorn beetles with their incredible antennae, and the astonishing forms and colours of many fungi; not only of the superb cats, but of the elephants and dolphins, the preposterous mandrills, the sea-horses and star-fishes, the frilled whelks and innumerable other fantastic and beautiful shell-fishes, and the rays, gurnards and conger-eels which when seen in an aquarium moving in their proper element are as thrilling as the vivid angel-fishes or the surprising creatures that live in the greatest ocean depths. Among the birds we find the incredible toucans and the shoe-billed heron, as well as the exquisite wagtails and the magnificent condors, and examining them we find in beak, legs and feet, plumage and bony structure, features which show not only a delicate adaptation of form to purpose, a perfect functional efficiency, but also as overplus an unfailing gesture of artistry, of style in the doing, and many strokes of sheer imaginative extravagance. In the plant world we find the cactuses and the bryony as well as the gentians; the sombre fritillaries and the conifers with their strange geometry, and the gourds with their outrageous flowers and their fruits in an unending variety of form and colour. And the same creative power and beauty is shown by the most primitive creatures, by the corals and sponges and by those shining ctenophors which so greatly charmed that unusual naturalist the diarist 'Barbellion'. All show the same quality in the drawing.

The parallels with works of art designed by man are thus

Beauty in Art and Nature

not hard to seek, and some capacity of the order of design is needed to account for the resemblance. But, we ask again, to whom or what can the design be attributed?

Now we are asked by the scientist to believe that the fantastic form and markings of a panda, the powerful grace of a swan, and the coloured anthers and spotting of a lily, have been produced by the accumulation of chance variations preserved by a process of natural selection, with nowhere any consciousness of end or purpose such as the word design implies. The Darwinians were accused by Samuel Butler of having banished mind from the evolutionary process. Earlier theorists had believed in purposeful variation, and I too would wish to repeat Butler's charge. It is inconceivable to me that such beauty can be the result of accident, of an accumulation of small chance variations each of which would be meaningless without some consciousness of the end to be reached. And the same argument applies equally to the development of all that delicate functional apparatus, the stages of which might well be quite useless by themselves. Far more credible would be a theory by which a spirit of each race had worked through the generations, carrying out some design or fancy of the same order as the creation of an artist. It requires an effort for a mind timed to note the separate generations to see such a movement as a whole, as a creative gesture; it must be imagined as a vibration of the separate 'stills' we are normally aware of, a flipping of pages in rapid sequence to make an animated picture of the evolutionary process. And I do not care what present ignorance of the means involved may stand in the way of this hypothesis, this belief that the creature has designed itself.

The design thus produced may or may not have a function. We may regard the forms as uselessly beautiful, like an artist's fancy; or regard them, like the orthodox biologist, as devices for use in some way, known or unknown, in the struggle for existence, giving protection against enemies or arming the

Beauty in Art and Nature

creature for aggression; or we may (merely taking the mystery a stage farther) postulate a form of sexual selection. The sexual ideals of each race would be thus embodied in the forms and colours we find beautiful in animals and plants. Human fashions and artistry in dress would on this hypothesis proceed, more ephemerally, from the same impulse; and this raises a question whether our delight is not perhaps only a reflection of some sexual impulse of our own, just as the swan, the eagle and the bull of Jupiter's metamorphoses represent three aspects of the sexual ideal of the human female. But this, as I have said, would be merely to take the mystery a stage farther removed; for we have no explanation of these sexual preferences and ideals; we cannot say why a particular form is preferred.

It is of course the orthodox religious view that all such beauty is the work of God, the Creator whose creatures we all are. Rejecting this argument as verbal sleight-of-hand, I find that the view also places us in a dilemma: It is inconceivable that a beneficent God would design his creatures for mutual destruction, a sort of universal cock-fight, or alternatively that a God thus arming his creatures for a fight could possibly be beneficent. Some racial faculty, inadequately represented by the words consciousness and vision, would better account for all such design, but it is of course pure hypothesis that it exists. But it has I believe been claimed by accredited scientists that even minerals have a degree of 'awareness' of their existence and environment, while it has been supposed that crystals were matter's first attempt to organize itself, to achieve design and actively grow into beautiful forms. The siliceous skeletons of the very primitive living creatures called *Diatoms* and *Radiolaria* might well be regarded as akin to crystals, and a first stage beyond them.

Thus it is tempting to think of all rocks and mountain forms, from the smooth slopes of the Downs to the jagged

Beauty in Art and Nature

rhythmically splintered basalt, from the rounded asymmetrical pebble to the fantastic hollowed surface of the *Dreikanter* of the African desert, as having something of the same creative sculptural quality in them. Though it may be objected that these are shaped by the purely physical action of wind and rain and frost, it can still be claimed that the forms are determined by the innate character and bent of the rocks themselves. They are not, however, organic in the sense in which I have used the word, and the case for design made here can hardly include them.

But as far as living creatures are concerned that case must I think stand, in the absence of any other acceptable explanation. The biologist will doubtless reply that there is no evidence whatever of a collective consciousness, or of an organ capable of conceiving an end or purpose such as the word design implies. But since the patterns themselves and the analogies they suggest provide positive evidence, does not the onus of disproof rest on the biologist?

III

POETRY

THE SACRED FIRE

*An Essay on the Nature and Phases of English Poetry*¹

I am aware that the publication of another anthology is an act calling for serious justification, for something more than the mere avowal of a wish to see one's favourite poems assembled in a fittingly austere and beautiful typographical dress. In the present case, perhaps, a sufficient excuse may be found in the unusual point of view of the anthologist. Familiarity with the arts of form and colour usually called decorative, with the history of their styles and modes of creation, may suggest parallels and throw light on the theory of this art of poetry.

An acquaintance with those styles must lend an unusual tolerance of changing fashions. A choice of masterpieces of English silversmith's work, for example, or of furniture or pottery, covering several centuries, must obviously take account of widely different criteria of beauty and excellence prevailing at different times, and a taste that proposed to measure every style by a single standard derived from what at the moment was regarded as the best period, or from some theoretical consideration of fitness or ideal beauty, would accuse itself at once of a want of sensibility and imagination. An informed and adaptable taste would accept rather the dictum of Lessing when he wrote: '*Man hat keinen Geschmack wenn man nur einen einseitigen Geschmack hat; aber oft is man desto parteiischer. Der wahre Geschmack is der allgemeine, der*

¹ Adapted from the introduction to my anthology *The Sacred Fire* (*The Broadway Book of English Verse*), published by George Routledge & Sons.

The Sacred Fire:

*sich über Schönheiten von jeder Art verbreitet, aber von keiner mehr Vergnügen und Entzückung erwartet, als sie nach ihrer Art gewähren kann.*¹

In poetry, on the contrary, it is usual to find the anthologist and critic relying upon an implied theory of pure poetry, or, worse still, of some particular sort of subject-matter supposed to be 'poetical' or 'realistic', as the case may be (such as the more agreeable aspects of nature, or the more disagreeable aspects of civilization, both alike called Truth), by which whole movements in the history of English poetry are judged to be without merit. It is as though painting should be tied exclusively to landscape in the manner of Constable and his followers or to some other restricted school. The unfortunate poet of the 'bad period' is represented in anthologies if at all by his least characteristic work. Whatever holds most strongly the peculiar interests or aspirations or flavour of its time tends to be suppressed, and by the fashionable practice of mingling the most diverse manners in what Palgrave called 'the most poetical order' nothing receives the support of its proper setting; all styles tend to be dissolved into a mere common measure of like and unlike. It is therefore one of my purposes in this introductory essay, to show how by disregarding the fashions of the moment and by accepting the fact of difference, even to the point of applauding extravagance and excess, a sharper, more vivid impression and deeper understanding may be had of English verse in the whole range of its excellences.

Such a recognition of diversity brings an additional advantage in fitting the mind for the reception of modern work, of whatever is genuinely new and creative in one's own time, and this is surely the final test of a sensibility to poetry. The academic single standard presumes likeness, and

¹ 'He has no taste whose taste is for one sort of thing only, though such one-sided partisanship is common enough. True taste is all-embracing, comprehending beauty of every kind, never expecting from any a greater or different delight or satisfaction than it can by its nature give.'

an Essay on English Poetry

every innovation, every extension of subject-matter, imagery, rhythm and vocabulary, calls for the familiar reluctant re-making of the canon. But if every movement in the past is thought of as having its own aesthetics the mind is at least left free to perceive if it can the merit of original work, however unlike that may be to what has been done before.

That we are satisfied to call so many various compositions alike by the name of poetry would at first sight seem to imply the existence of a common standard, or at least some common essence, and the extent to which the attempted isolation or definition of this has in fact occupied men's minds is shown by a vast body of criticism, ancient as well as modern, attempting to answer the question 'What is poetry?' Of most of this it may be said that it was concerned first of all with the justification of the poetry of its own age. But every well-founded and comprehensive theory has shown the essential quality to belong to form (an inadequate word to be further defined presently) rather than to subject-matter, and much play has been made in consequence with the conception of pure poetry, something akin to absolute music, something which has risen clear of meaning and rests only on the power of syllables and words when placed in a certain order to evoke what we call poetic emotion, to bear what we recognize as a purely poetic significance. This conception of pure poetry has given colour to the theory of a single essence, but every attempt to isolate some aspect of rhythm or imagery as constituting this essence has always failed in face of the inseparable union of sound and meaning. And though it is not difficult to find poetry which has attained to this 'condition of music', to which in Pater's excellent phrase all art should aspire, it seems certain that no great poetry has ever been composed with the deliberate intention of achieving it, of directly reaching this state of abstract perfection and purity. A living painter has well said of his own art that 'the deliberate pursuit of purely formal qualities as ends in themselves can

The Sacred Fire:

lead only to an empty and lifeless formalism; real formal significance seems only to arise when the artist is at least partially preoccupied with one or other of the secondary . . . or impure emotions'. In poetry, equally, a purely formal intention can, it seems, produce nothing better than a 'Jabberwocky'.

For though an abstract, purely formal, beauty may be achieved, it must be regarded as a final state, reached through a preoccupation, an excitement about some in the strict sense irrelevant concern. What is called the subject-matter of poetry has included in the past an endless variety of such exciting causes. Sometimes personal affairs of love or lust, hate or indignation, or the revelation of truth or beauty, passionately experienced, they are as often matters of communal aspiration, concerned with religious or political movements which have fired the imagination of their time. No subject can in fact be excluded as beyond the bounds of poetry. Occasionally, but seldom in England, we find a group of men united in a devotion to certain kinds of imagery or symbolism, or even to some technical principle or innovation, such as free verse or the use or avoidance of certain words or forms. These movements are more familiar in other arts, where we commonly find the artists claiming such innovations as the essence of their art and by this preoccupation leaving themselves free for the more or less unconscious creation of formal beauty. This is or was the case with many handicrafts, where the craftsman (who may not have called himself an artist at all) was wholly occupied in doing a job with some practical purpose. The abstract qualities which we call beauty then came like a benediction upon work in itself utilitarian. The material, in both the wide and restricted sense of the word, was used up in this occupation, and the result was a work of art unconsciously created. Thus too for Wilfred Owen the poetry was 'in the pity'; it could not come directly from any dilettante trifling with words. Yet

an Essay on English Poetry

we need not share, save for the 'poetic moment', the human excitement which was the occasion of the poet's writing. We can care as deeply for the beauty of Milton's *Paradise Lost* without the least acceptance of his theology or sympathy with his purpose in writing it. That this is so is surely proof that the poetic essence resides in the qualities I have called formal.

But excitement or passion or devotion to a cause are not enough to make a poet. It has often happened that a man sincerely moved has chosen to write in verse but has achieved nothing more than an ephemeral *pastiche* of the worn and obsolete counters of an earlier or lately current poetical language. The impulse to rhythmical speech must be united to a conscience and sensibility that reject all language and imagery that are not fire-new, as it were, and beyond this there must be that positive creative gift by which words and images can be chosen and arranged in precisely that order whose poetical significance and music we can recognize if not so easily define. Without this gift not the most sensitive taste and intelligence, nor metrical ingenuity and skill, nor extensive vocabulary and facility, nor vision alone, can ever make a poet. Swinburne had many of these gifts, and the empty clang of his writing is the result as much of a want of genuine poetic fire as of a lack of deep and sincere feeling; the words in true poetry seem to be supercharged with meaning, not to be in excess of it. In Shelley too (as for example in much of the famous *Ode to the West Wind*) and in Emily Brontë, we often find a flood of words carried rapidly along by the mere force of the poet's vehemence, but lacking altogether that intensity which marks the finest poetry. The words and phrases are severally flat and insignificant, even suggesting makeshifts or 'fill-ups'; they are not the 'right' words, but just ordinary words. Given, however, the double excitement of creative fire and human passion the most intractable material may be consumed, the most far-fetched

The Sacred Fire:

imagery may be fused to white heat and the most ordinary language be transfigured; every word may be given a life of its own and out of the amorphous matrix of common speech the jewel of poetry may be crystallized.

Poetry is thus a state to which language may attain, and no one part or aspect of a poem—neither a special kind of subject-matter in its content, nor imagery alone, nor any particular sort of words—can be claimed as its essence. Attempts at definition in these terms must always fail. It is like light, which must needs be coloured by some transmitting medium or reflected from some object not itself on which it strikes before we can ever become aware of it. ‘Pure poetry’ can no more exist for us apart, than life can be made known to us without a material embodiment. And its recognition is a direct act of the intuition or ‘imaginative reason’, never a matter of taking thought. It is ‘felt in the blood, and felt along the heart’, or as Housman more bluntly put it, you recognize it by a sensation in the pit of the stomach which can never be mistaken by one who has experienced it.

Of the ultimate source and nature of this poetic fire and sensibility I know of no satisfying account. Nor do I know of any adequate description of its outward manifestation in words. Often described as music, with a disastrous implication of smoothness or jingling prettiness, the rhythms and patterns of poetic language are obviously of an order very different from those of instrumental or vocal music, with their precise notation of pitch. The science of prosody may suggest a kinship, with its concern for the measurement of syllables and pauses and the counting of accents; but it must ignore not only the colours which words may acquire in the texture of a poem but the pattern of meanings in conjunction also. As with every other science concerned with quantities the essential living values will always elude the instruments. Even the metrical schemes on which prosody insists are not to be mistaken for the rhythms themselves with their strange

an Essay on English Poetry

vitality, any more than the trellis which supports a vine is to be mistaken for the living plant, though we should perhaps be less aware of the true rhythm if the metrical beat or background were not there to reveal it by inflections and infractions, the living opposed to and revealed by the mechanical. The point need not have been stressed had not the confusion encouraged the setting (sometimes with the consent of poets) of the words of poetry into irrelevant vocalizations called songs. Little but the mere content, with something perhaps of the imagery, can survive this process, and even these must be robbed of their urgency. In spite of the original meaning of the word lyric and a full consciousness of heresy I have no hesitation in asserting that poetry in its fully developed form (I shall speak of ballads later) is destroyed by this attempted union. Form and content are in a poem fused and one. Impose the melody of the musician upon the entirely different music of the poet, and the delicate structure of the latter is distorted and destroyed; the mere value of the words as meaning alone can survive, with hardly more evocative power than they had before the poet had transmuted them. That Campion was willing to write for his own composing is hardly to the point, though it shows perhaps that he was more aware of his gifts as a musician than of the character of his powers as a poet, while Milton's acclamation of the union of voice and verse reveals an equally surprising failure. Only such cold perfections as the songs of Ben Jonson can bear without loss the distortions that music must inflict upon verse. But this is because they have nothing of true poetry to lose. It is rare indeed to hear one's favourite poems satisfyingly read aloud, but who has ever enjoyed them in a 'musical setting'? This distinction is important since it helps to define by elimination the distinguishing characters of poetry, but it also raises the difficult question of the relation of written to spoken verse which must be briefly answered here.

The Sacred Fire:

In its secular origin English poetry had a tradition of spoken (not written) popular use; narrative poetry and the drama usually, and ballads always, existed by oral tradition, even after literary uses had become general, and much play has recently been made by traditionalists and others, particularly in America, with the conception of a new popular art of spoken verse concerned with objective things, vivid and direct, such as the ballads and mystery plays are supposed to have been. Such compositions had a strong metrical framework, with bold rhymes in a robust text upon which improvised variations could be made without injury; they could be altered in a dozen ways at the whim of the speaker or singer. Now having in mind the whole body of our written poetry, from which this anthology has been chosen, I cannot but regard these popular creations as the crude precursors rather than the austere primitives of the art of poetry. They are not even the sole precursors, any more than the music of such ballads (whose descendants in more than name are modern drawing-room songs) is the source of the art of concerted music, which has the chants of the mediaeval church and ultimately the music of the Greek ritual drama to look to for its ancestors. And I am not prepared for the sake of this theory of popular origin to regard English poetry from the sixteenth century almost to the present day as a decadent growth arising from the morbid preoccupation of romantic individualist poets with their private destiny and troubles. (Even the least individualist modern poet seeks the precise word with as great a regard for his personal inspiration as any romantic). To me the written poetry is a mature art, while the other is childish; and so entirely personal is it in its private communication that the presence of a professional or any other speaker comes, for me, as a blatant and intolerable intrusion. I have called the ballad sort of poetry childish, and it is this in more than a figurative sense; it is such an art as appeals to children, with its vivid extravert play-acting or

an Essay on English Poetry

fairy-tale character and its obvious metrical beat. The mature art of poetry, on the other hand, requires not only a mature sensibility and a cultivated feeling for the overtones of language, but a body of adult experience which children fortunately cannot have. The true music of poetry is thus something they can hardly be expected to hear.

Now if we accept the distinction just made, and in the absence of a better terminology continue to speak of the music of poetry, we may proceed to describe a poem as a composition of evocative words passing beyond meaning into music. It may well be a composition of such compelling power that we find ourselves accepting any words having the 'right' sounds, however remote their meaning, if once the thing has come to poetic life, if in the familiar words, it has fired our imagination. This is not merely the operation of Coleridge's dictum that a poet must be judged by his best lines and that a poem cannot be all poetry, but a proof of the willing suspension of the rational faculty before what I would call the parallel or unwritten poem. Much seems to depend on the right onset, the initial flight. Many instances could be cited. In such a poem as John Donne's *Dream*, the enchanting tenderness of the first lines, with their caressing sounds, might have carried us past harshnesses of diction far more disturbing than those actually used.

*Deare love, for nothing lesse then thee
Would I have broke this happy dreame;
It was a theme
For reason, much too strong for phantasie,
Therefore thou wakd'st me wisely; yet
My Dreame thou brok'st not, but continued'st it,
Thou art so true that thoughts of thee suffice
To make dreames truths; and fables histories;
Enter these armes, for since thou thought'st it best,
Not to dreame all my dreame, let's act the rest.*

The Sacred Fire:

This opening passage, with its sense of darkness and trembling quiet, sustained throughout, begins the 'parallel poem' to which the words with their meaning seem in the end the mere accompaniment. The calm faith, again, of the first lines of Wordsworth's *Ode* inspires a serene perfection and simplicity of utterance which sustains us through long passages which as meaning are as empty as anything Wordsworth ever wrote.

*There was a time when meadow, grove and stream,
The earth, and every common sight,
To me did seem
Apparelled in celestial light,
The glory and the freshness of a dream.
It is not now as it hath been of yore;—
Turn wheresoe'er I may,
By night or day,
The things which I have seen I now can see no more.*

The glow persists until a new burst of poetic passion flames out, and so to the end.

*—Not for these I raise
The song of thanks and praise;
But for those obstinate questionings
Of sense and outward things,
Fallings from us, vanishings;
Blank misgivings of a creature
Moving about in worlds not realised,
High instincts, before which our mortal nature
Did tremble like a guilty thing surprised:
But for those first affections,
Those shadowy recollections,
Which, be they what they may,
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,
Are yet a master-light of all our seeing;*

an Essay on English Poetry

*Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make
Our noisy years seem moments in the being
Of the eternal Silence: truths that wake,
To perish never;
Which neither listlessness, nor mad endeavour,
Nor man nor boy,
Nor all that is at enmity with joy,
Can utterly abolish or destroy!*

How far the poet is himself conscious of this parallel poem, beyond meaning, which accompanies the articulate expression with which he must in the first place be concerned is a matter on which I cannot offer an opinion of any value; and for reasons at which I have already hinted I do not think the poets themselves are always the best judges of their own work, or fully conscious of the nature of their inspiration. But this is to me and to those whose sensibility I most respect quite certainly the essence of the matter; it is the absolute poem or incantation. There is a baffling paradox in this. While we may read a contemporary poet for his matter, which heartens us by its zeal for a cause we have at heart, it may be, or by its praise of scenes we love or its description of ideas and experiences we may have shared with him, and while these passions are needed to make him a poet, it is on that other obscurer gift that his power to move us to the depths must ultimately depend; and that other quality alone can give a poem an enduring appeal long after the cause is lost or won or forgotten. What a poet means is important, especially to his contemporaries and to himself; his message or observations may be original and thrilling, or they may be commonplace. But his ultimate rank as a seer must depend on what he says, on the enchantment he can make with words, giving them a significance beyond intelligible meaning. It is this music, this pattern, which like beauty of every kind has 'something in it of Divinity more than the ear discovers: it is an Hieroglyphical

The Sacred Fire:

and shadowed lesson of the whole World and creatures of God'.

★ ★ ★

My choice of poems, then, was made in the belief that poetry is a state to which impassioned writing of many kinds can attain, that there have been poets in every age to tend its sacred fire, and that each movement is to be judged by its own standard in regard not only to its choice of poetical subject-matter but also to its special order of technical accomplishment. Each has its own language. It would be logical to carry the argument a stage further and contend that each poet is a law unto himself, and this we should not hesitate to do, to the annoyance of intellectualist critics dealing in word-begotten absolutes. But it is in fact hardly necessary to apply the principle, since the poets themselves have always (though no doubt to some extent unconsciously) belonged to more or less distinct movements sharing the same ideals. Often enough they have had the same human aspirations; but even when outwardly at variance they have had in common with their contemporaries a certain poetic character which we recognize as peculiar to their time. That essential character is more easily recognized in the work of times long past, but I believe it to be always there. The broad divisions by style are generally admitted and are in fact commonplaces of literary history. There are, however, to my ear and sense briefer 'periods' of this kind, with less obvious characters in common and frequently overlapping. These form the separate sections of this book, representing the successive impulses which have inspired our English poetry, and I shall presently survey them very briefly in the light of the foregoing observations. Particular instances may make the special characters clear. But before proceeding to this I must pause for a moment and try to account for the changes of taste and outlook which mark this procession. Mere action and reaction provide a partial explanation. The sons revolt

an Essay on English Poetry

against the fathers, and every generation of young poets rejects the manner of its immediate predecessors, grown lifeless and academic, even to the point of denying all merit to the creative work which founded the departing fashion. Disgusted by the host of *pasticheurs* who have picked up the tone and vocabulary of a once vital mode, they are blind to all the genuine achievement that went to make it. Such blindness is excusable in a creative artist who can be interested only in the kind of art he is himself intent on achieving and naturally denies the worth of all else; and he will of course be a leader of fashion in criticism. But others less preoccupied need not share this narrowness, hard though it is not to be prejudiced against the exploiters of borrowed sentiments and phrases. These, lacking authentic fire, set up a paper flame to be lit by reflected light. The 'poetic sentiments' they indulge in are the empty shells of a once-living mode of poetry. Even to-day, in spite of a so-called classical reaction, vibrations from the Romantic Movement still persist—moonlit scenes, noble suffering, the songs of birds, and the like, are still called 'poetical' by people to whom these things are the necessary apparatus of poetry, the only 'poetical' subjects, by people who would be shocked and alarmed by the strangeness of a genuine poetical experience. Reactions against an exhausted mode, however, account only for the fact of change; they do not determine its direction. If we were convinced that the stuff of poetry lay in what it dealt with we could say that the poets of a period are united in the communal hopes, aspirations or despairs (as the case might be) of their own time. But since we find that the special character is bound up with a quality we have called formal, something shared occasionally with a contemporary who stands outside the common enthusiasms, we are driven to conjecture some deeper source. The same problem arises in connection with the genesis of styles in other arts. I do not think that the art of any period is to be regarded as the mere product 'of the political, economic,

The Sacred Fire:

social and scientific influences of the age' (as is usually supposed), though obviously it is subject to such influences and derives its occasions from them. Its essential nature is due to some deeper creative cause. Movements in thought or social evolution cannot account for what is characteristic in form in any of the arts. However readily the critic may find this or that aspect of a style appropriate or 'expressive' of an age, it is found so, I believe, by a rationalizing process, and the essentials—a preference for a particular sort of curve or rhythm, for symmetry or the lack of it—remain a mystery as obscure as the source of inspiration in music, where there can be no articulate reference to the life of a time. I cannot equate an idea with a curve or complex of lines; though if I believed in a connection I might fancy some kind of fitness or symbolical relation between them. The materialism that would find a complete and easy explanation of everything in its surroundings and antecedents is naturally popular at the present time; it gives the critic matter to write about and the public lacking a sense of form is satisfied to find the arts explained as little more than illustration. In poetry the same conditions hold and the difficulty is increased by the fact that words are also normally used to convey information, which the literal-minded insist on regarding as the whole of the matter. Yet the indignation often felt at the efforts of those who treat poetry as no more than meaning, who write notes to 'elucidate' it and research endlessly into the lives and waste-paper baskets of poets in search of 'human' interest, is perhaps after all misplaced. These creatures who torment the body of poetry are perhaps least harmfully employed in thus avoiding her vital parts. For just as absolute beauty is not reached by a direct striving after it, so perhaps it is better for the reader to avoid too direct a consciousness of the purely poetical qualities. Analysis is here as always a danger; the bloom is easily lost by 'handling' and over-familiarity. I remember a remark of Bacon, a warning to the effect that

an Essay on English Poetry

atheism is found less often in those who deny, than in those whose minds are cauterized and made insensitive by too much handling of holy things. That is the danger here, and it is cause for satisfaction that no adequate terminology for the discussion of poetry itself has yet been found.

Bearing in mind the periodic changes of style in English poetry one is tempted to conjecture a subconscious communal mind of the age or race to which all poets have at times access; and though it begs the question to some extent, the hypothesis is suggestive enough to explain the undoubted fact that the deeper despairs and liberations of the whole race of Englishmen, which are scarcely perceptible to contemporaries but are plain enough in a long view, do in fact find expression in poetry. The following notes must of necessity touch upon little else and only in briefest outline, with many glimpses of the obvious as well as some strongly held preferences and dislikes. I shall avoid however the customary 'period' labels.

★ ★ ★

English poetry is usually held to begin with Chaucer or the even earlier anonymous poets of the fourteenth century. But these I hold are written not in English but in the language from which our modern tongue has grown. It is usual to re-write Chaucer, and the inference is the obvious one I have just stated. These pre-Tudor poems, however, may usefully convey an impression of the origins of the art to which this volume is devoted, and they will themselves be found beautiful by anyone caring to take a little trouble with them. The doctrine of verbal inspiration implied in this essay of course forbids absolutely any attempt to 'modernize' these poems, and on the same ground I have throughout the book preserved the poets' own spelling, setting-out, and use of capitals and italics; the texts wherever possible have been taken from volumes seen through the press by the authors themselves. There can be no justification for altering a poet's

The Sacred Fire:

text save a belief that poetry is a single thing in its origin as well as its final state, and this I have attempted to show is false. The fact of difference, revealed principally in outlook and mode of expression, covers also such smaller matters as choice of type and the arrangement of lines on a page.

This doctrine of the inviolability of the words of a poem must carry also a conviction that their translation into another language is impossible. Translation is possible with writing that merely conveys information or argument, but even this needs qualification, since thought may be shaped by the very structure of a language. Translation begins to be impossible when the words are given by the writer a significance beyond their mere intellectual content, in fact when the writing begins to be a work of art, and reaches the extreme limit of absurdity in the attempted translation of a poem. The ideas of a poem may be rendered into another language, the poetic qualities may be given in the nearest equivalent and the translation may even be greater than the original; but it will be the translator's and not the poet's poem.

Contrary to the usual custom I have not hesitated to include a few long poems (as well as paragraphs from others still longer), exceeding the length conventionally assigned to what is called the lyric. In my view the academic classification of poetry under the names used in the ancient world is on several grounds indefensible and impracticable where English poetry is concerned. Precisely the same poetic qualities are to be found in *Paradise Lost* and parts of the plays of Shakespeare as in shorter works, and even the subsidiary qualities of form, of design in the architecture of a poem, are as conspicuous in the easily detachable paragraphs of Milton's epic as in 'lyrics' more obviously complete in themselves. The arbitrary division moreover excludes much of the most beautiful blank verse, which in its many varieties is among the chief glories of our language.

I have naturally made no distinction between 'classical'

an Essay on English Poetry

and modern; modern should mean nothing more or less than original. I have further endeavoured as far as possible to disregard the prejudices of the present day, and I am well aware that some of the poets whose characteristic work I have included are at the moment decidedly unfashionable; each being represented by his most individual (even his most extravagant) work there is naturally much that may be found mannered and artificial, or gushing and sentimental, by the single standard of the present day. On the other hand I have ventured to omit deliberately some 'accepted classics' which in my opinion are derivative or owe their fame to qualities not strictly poetical. The arrangement though in the main chronological is not rigidly or pedantically so, and it is hoped that the grouping into periods and the deliberate ordering within the groups will give a sense of vital order and rhythmical progression which are naturally lacking in a wholly arbitrary arrangement (however ingenious) due merely to the whims of an editor.

★ ★ ★

English poetry proper may be said to begin with the emergence of the new spirit in Europe which we call the Renaissance, and here as in every other art Italy was the leader. The Italian and Italian-Classical forms and manners were everywhere copied at first. Like the contemporary Tudor architecture this early Renaissance poetry is awkward in movement but with unmistakable fire and life beneath the often absurd apparel. Sir Thomas Wyatt was our first considerable master in the new manner. In his best work an authentic tenderness and passion pass over into music:

*They flee from me, that sometye did me seke
With naked fote stalking within my chamber.
I have sene them gentill, tame, and meke,
That now are wyld, and do not remember
That sometye they have put themself in daunger*

The Sacred Fire:

*To take bred at my hand: and now they raunge
Besily seking with a continuell change.*

*Thancked be fortune it hath ben othrewise
Twenty tymes better; but ons, in speciall,
In thinne arraye, after a pleasant gyse,
When her lose gowne did from her shouldders fall,
And she me caught in her armes long and small,
Therewith all swetely did me kysse
And softly said: 'Dere hert how like you this.'*

*It was no dreme: I lay brode waking
But all is turnde, thorough my gentilnes,
Into a straunge fashion of forsaking:
And I have leve to goo of her goodenes:
And she also to use new fangilnes:
But syns that I unkindely so am served,
I wold fain knowe what hath she now deserved.*

He was also a master of sombre onsets in another mood:

*If thou wilt mighty be, flee from the rage
Of cruell wyll, and see thou kepe thee free
From the foule yoke of sensuall bondage,
For though thy empyre stretche to Indian sea,
And for thy feare trembleth the fardest Thylee,
If thy desire have over thee the power,
Subject then art thou and no governour.*

Wyatt's immediate successors—even the praiseworthy Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey—were clumsy practitioners by comparison, with their laborious versification, conceits and ill-considered extravagance. A more sensitive instrument was created by Edmund Spenser, though not until Queen Elizabeth had reigned for nearly twenty years. Of the supposed Elizabethan morning freshness there is little enough in his early poems, even in the *Shepherd's Calendar*. This was a grey sunrise, deeply charged with despondency due no

an Essay on English Poetry

doubt to the troubles of the Reformation and the threat of a Spanish war. It was the age of Thomas Tallis, whose sombre music expresses its spirit with overwhelming power. Not until the latter part of the reign, with the emergence of a new national consciousness and hope, do we find the zest, animation and fresh colour, the azure and vermilion of the characteristic Elizabethan poetry. Spenser had been a forerunner, but shared in the movement in its final form, with his tranquil music:

*But let stil Silence trew night watches keepe,
That sacred peace may in assurance rayne,
And tymely sleep, when it is tyme to sleepe,
 May poure his limbs forth on your pleasant playne,
The whiles an hundred little winged loves,
Like divers fethered doves,
Shall fly and flutter round about your bed,
And in the secret darke, that none reproves,
Their prety stealthes shal worke, and snares shal spread
To filch away sweet snatches of delight,
Conceald through covert night.*

The precocious Marlowe, too, was a herald, maturing a few years earlier than his contemporaries and expressing more plainly than they the hard masculinity (not to say brutality) which is as much a part of the Elizabethan temper as the too-easily-prettified sensuous feeling for physical beauty. The violence of *Tamburlaine* is characteristic

*I will with Engines never exercise,
Conquer, sacke, and utterly consume
Your cities and your golden pallaces,
And with the flames that beat against the clowdes
Incense the heavens and make the starres to melt
As if they were the teares of Mahomet,
For hot consumption of his countries pride.*

The Sacred Fire:

But Marlowe was a poet, as the magic of a hundred single lines must prove

*Run tilting round about the firmament
And breake their burning Lances in the aire,*

Glistered with breathing stars, . . .

*These lovers parled by the touch of hands,
True love is mute, and oft amazed stands.
Thus while dum signs their yeelding harts entangled,
The aire with sparkes of living fire was spangled,*

It was an age of widespread fashion and accomplishment in the writing of verses, especially of songs, though only a small part of the enormous literary production can be considered as creative or more than gracefully turned. But the best is enchanting indeed; Thomas Lodge may have had Italian models, but his happiness is unmistakable

*O shadie vales, O faire inriched meades,
O sacred woodes, sweete fields, and rising mountaines,
O painted flowers, greene herbes, where Flora treads,
Refresht by wanton windes and watrie fountaines!*

*Love in my bosome, like a bee
Doth sucke his sweete;
Now with his wings he playes with me,
Now with his feete.
Within mine eyes he makes his nest,
His bed amidst my tender brest
My kisses are his dayly fest
And yet he robs me of my rest.
Ah wanton will ye?*

Shakespeare was the supreme master of song-writing, in many familiar examples, utterly perfect, as he had been in the earlier 'luscious' style of narrative that produced *Venus and Adonis* as well as *Hero and Leander*.

an Essay on English Poetry

That the Elizabethan poets were a school or movement, however, united by common literary ideals (as well as by the deeper sub-consciousness of which I have spoken), is in spite of minor squabbles among them fully testified by literary history, and not least by the remarkable outburst of sonnet-writing between the years 1590 and 1595.

Before the end of the century the Elizabethan zest, product of a quick-witted and sensitive but not as a rule deeply reflective age, already showed signs of breaking down before a newly awakened sense of futility and despair. The prescient spirit of John Donne in his poems, with their magnificent openings

*All Kings, and all their favorites,
All glory of honors, beauties, wits,

Who ever comes to shroud me, do not harme,
Nor question much
That subtile wreath of haire, which crownes my arme;*

the rugged melancholy Chapman,

*Muses that sing loves sensuall emperie,
And Lovers kindling your enraged fires
At Cupids bonfires burning in the eye,
Blowne with the emptie breath of vaine desires,
You that prefer the painted Cabinet
Before the welthy Jewels it doth store yee,
That all your joys in dying figures set,
And staine the living substance of your glory,
Abjure those joyes, abhor their memory,
And let my love the honord subject be
Of love, and honors compleate historie;
Your eyes were never yet, let in to see
The majestie and riches of the minde,
But dwell in darknes; for your God is blinde.*

and occasional passages in the work of Shakespeare, all may

The Sacred Fire:

be said to foreshadow the beginning of a new phase. In place of a happy outward-looking enjoyment we see the mind of the age turned in upon itself, and for nearly forty years the most moving English poetry was inspired by the thought of death and speculation about the meaning and purpose of life. I need only quote a passage from *Measure for Measure*

*. . . Aye, but to die, and go we know not where;
To lie in cold obstruction and to rot:
This sensible warm motion to become
A kneaded clod; and the delighted spirit
To bathe in fierie floods, or to reside
In thrilling regions of thicke-ribbed Ice,
To be imprison'd in the viewlesse windes,
And blowne with restless violence round about
The pendent world; or to be worse than worst
Of those, that lawlesse and incertaine thoughts
Imagine howling, 'tis too horrible.
The weariest, and most loathed worldly life,
That Age, Ache, Penury and Imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a Paradise
To what we feare of death . . .*

and the opening of a chorus from a play by Fulke Greville,

*O wearisome condition of Humanity!
Born under one law, to another bound:
Vainely begot and yet forbidden vanity,
Created sicke, commanded to be sound: . . .*

Much of this was the poetry absurdly called metaphysical, abused by Johnson and others as frigid and contorted, but capable of a flaming intensity which was all the fiercer for the refractory nature of its material. Shakespeare's tragedies, and even his last plays for all their note of reconciliation, belong to this movement of the English poetic spirit, as do the sombre plays of Webster, and Donne's twilit poems also. The

an Essay on English Poetry

Authorized Version of the Bible is most moving in precisely those terrible moods which stirred the poets most deeply.

*Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth,
While the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh,
When thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them:*

*Let the day perish wherein I was born,
And the night in which it was said,
There is a man-child conceived.
Let that day be darkness . . .*

The very accents here are those of the poetry of the time, and as verse, not prose, I am convinced, such lines should be written. This period saw the first expression in modern English of the emotions called religious; and the movement thus started by Herbert and King still produced vital poetry as late as the middle of the seventeenth century, in the work of Vaughan and Crashaw and Thomas Traherne, and by this time a new movement had come and almost gone.

Bishop Henry King's melancholy already had the typical resignation and serenity of the early Caroline poets, as in his moving *Exequy*:

*Sleep on, my Love, in thy cold bed
Never to be disquieted!
My last good-night! Thou wilt not wake
Till I thy fate shall overtake:
Till age, or grief, or sickness, must
Marry my body to that dust
It so much loves; and fill the room
My heart keeps empty in thy Tomb.

Thou like the Vann, first took'st the field,
And gotten hast the victory
In thus adventuring to dy
Before me, whose more years might crave
A just precedence in the grave.*

The Sacred Fire:

*But hark! My pulse, like a soft Drum,
Beats my approach, tells Thee I come:
And slow howere my marches be,
I shall at last sit down by Thee.*

George Herbert's poems are especially beautiful in contrasts of despair and resignation, above all in the sudden quiet after storm with which some of his best pieces end.

*But as I rav'd and grew more fierce and wilde
At every word,
Me thought I heard one calling. "Child!"
And I reply'd, "My Lord!"*

*Thou tarriest, while I die
And fall to nothing. Thou dost reigne
And rule on high,
While I remain
In bitter grief. Yet am I stil'd
Thy childe.*

Richard Crashaw, oldest of the generation after King and Herbert, was a singular case and an apparent exception to my rule. Though a priest like the others he was in poetic temperament totally unlike them. With his extravagant sensuality he was more like a belated Elizabethan:

*Happy indeed, who never misses
To improve that pretious hour
And every day
Seize her sweet prey,
All fresh and fragrant as He rises
Dropping with a baulmy Showr
A delicious dew of spices;
O let the blissfull heart hold fast
Her heavenly arm-full, she shall tast
At once ten thousand paradises;*

an Essay on English Poetry

*She shall have power
To rifle and deflour
The rich and roseall spring of those rare sweets
Which with a swelling bosome there she meets;
Boundles and infinite, bottomles treasures
Of pure inebriating pleasures.
Happy proof she shal discover
What joy, what blisse,
How many Heav'ns at once it is,
To have her God become her Lover.*

Henry Vaughan and Thomas Traherne were mystics whose intensity of vision engendered poetry. Vaughan shows the wider range.

*O let me climbe
When I lye down! The Pious soul by night
Is like a clouded starre, whose beames, though sed
To shed their Light
Under some Cloud,
Yet are above,
And shine, and move
Beyond that misty shroud.
So in my bed,
That Curtain'd grave, though sleep, like ashes, hide
My lamp, and life, both shall in thee abide.*

Traherne's greatness lies in his gift of innocence, of seeing things as if for the first time, transfigured:

*These little Limmes
These Eys and Hands which here I find,
These rosie Cheeks wherwith my Life begins,
Where have ye been? Behind
What Curtain were ye from me hid so long!
Where was, in what abyss, my Speaking Tongue?*

The Sacred Fire:

A Stranger here

*Strange Things doth meet, Strange Glories see;
Strange Treasures lodg'd in this fair World appear,
Strange all, and New to me;
But that they mine should be, who nothing was,
That Strangest is of all, yet brought to pass.*

The impulse that stirred so profound a searching as this cannot be accounted for by a mere dissatisfaction with James I or a sense of the vanity of conquest (though these may have given it additional force); it would be better explained by an awakening conscience—a vision sharpened and intensified by national misfortune but essentially an access of deeper understanding and embitterment.

After such an experience, it was impossible ever to recapture completely the earlier mood of unselfconscious acceptance and delight. A quality of chastened happiness, of morning sunshine deeply and not unthinkingly enjoyed, is characteristic of a new movement, which appeared early in the reign of Charles I. This I like to think of as led by the young Milton, though perhaps the smiling irony and deep sensibility of Marvell, the graceful mockery of Suckling and grave simplicity of Sidney Godolphin are in their several ways just as typical. Milton's early poems are among the greatest in the language, beautiful alike in rhythm and cadence and in wealth of description. No English poems are more beloved than *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* with their enchanting landscapes.

*Right against the Eastern gate,
Where the great Sun begins his state,
Rob'd in flames, and Amber light,
The clouds in thousand Liveries dight.
While the Plowman near at hand,
Whistles ore the Furrow'd Land
And the Milkmaid singeth blithe,*

an Essay on English Poetry

*And the Mower whets his sithe,
And every Shepherd tells his tale
Under the Hawthorn in the dale.*

*And missing thee I walk unseen
On the dry smooth-shaven Green,
To behold the wandring Moon,
Riding neer her highest noon,
Like one that had bin led astray
Through the Heav'ns wide pathles way;
And oft, as if her head she bow'd,
Stooping through a fleecy cloud.
Oft on a Plat of rising ground,
I hear the far-off Curfeu sound,
Over som wide-water'd shoar,
Swinging slow with sullen roar;*

Andrew Marvell's early poems are equally precious and perfect, ranging from passionate irony and protest

*But at my back I alwaies hear
Times winged Charriot hurrying near:
And yonder all before us lye
Desarts of vast Eternity.
Thy Beauty shall no more be found,
Nor in thy marble Vault shall sound
My ecchoing Song; then Worms shall try
That long preserv'd Virginity:
And your quaint Honour turn to dust,
And into ashes all my Lust.
The Grave's a fine and private place,
But none, I think, do there embrace.*

*Now therefore, while the youthful hew
Sits on thy skin like morning dew
And while thy willing Soul transpires
At every pore with instant Fires*

The Sacred Fire:

*Now let us sport us while we may;
And now like am'rous birds of prey,
Rather at once our Time devour,
Than languish in his slow chapt pow'r.
Let us roll all our Strength, and all
Our Sweetness, up into one Ball;
And tear our Pleasures with rough strife
Thorough the iron gates of Life.
Thus, though we cannot make our Sun
Stand still, yet we will make him run . . .*

to the smiling happiness of *The Garden*.

Suckling had the same mocking gentleness and seriousness and felicity of expression, but would seldom take trouble.

*Oh, for some honest Lover's ghost,
Some kind unbodied post
Sent from the shades below.
I strangely long to know
Whether the noble Chaplets wear
Those that their mistress scorn did bear
Or those that were us'd kindly.*

None of these poets of Charles I's time could ever again banish awareness of the soul's maladies. Only Herrick may appear to be still the true blithe-hearted rather stupid Elizabethan, but even Herrick had his moments of misgiving:

*I sing of Brooks, of Blossomes, Birds, and Bowers:
Of April, May, of June, and July-flowers.
I sing of May-poles, Hock-carts, Wassails, Wakes,
Of Bride-grooms, Brides, and of their Bridall-cakes.
I write of Youth, of Love, and have Accesses
By these, to sing of cleanly Wantonnesse;
I sing of Dewes, of Raines, and piece by piece,
Of Balme, of Oyle, of Spice, and Ambergreece.
I sing of Times trans-shifting; and I write*

an Essay on English Poetry

How Roses first came Red, and Lillies White.

I write of Groves, of Twilights, and I sing

The Court of Mab, and of the Fairie-King.

I write of Hell; I sing (and ever shall)

Of Heaven, and hope to have it after all.

This beautiful running of streams after a night of terror slackened and ceased within a couple of decades. Marvell lapsed into a writer of dull satires and Milton ceased to write poetry altogether. The failure is usually accounted for by the arid puritan atmosphere of the Commonwealth, but the explanation is much too simple; both alike were the consequence of some less obvious cause.

When at length the obstruction was broken down, two new streams of poetry were liberated, with entirely different characters and direction: on the one hand the movement led by John Dryden looked forward to new forms and manners, while *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* at once ended an epoch and stand as the final culmination of its achievement. Milton in middle life had dreamed of 'a still time, when there shall be no more chiding' and it should be possible for him to write the long poem he had meditated since his boyhood. His dream was never fulfilled, but it was finally granted to him, in solitude and disgrace, to pour out in the greatest single poem in the English language all those treasures of learning and imagination he had accumulated during a lifetime devoted to the public service. It is, I suppose, a commonplace now to say that Milton was the inheritor of all that the Renaissance had to give in humanist learning and imagery. Much too came to him from the Hebrew literature so inspiringly translated just before he began to write. But these were no more than the material he used. Far more important in his writings is the sheer and unaccountable poetic gift that could charge with living splendour of colour and varied harmony all that mass of

The Sacred Fire:

often absurd material. The great poem is lit up again and again in long passages with a poetic fire unsurpassed in our language. No anthology of English poetry can be complete without some of these, and though in time it falls in another age with quite different poetic ideals the later work of Milton must take rank in my series as a whole movement in itself. To me it has been like a great mountain range with a thousand beautiful places waiting to be discovered and rediscovered amongst its undeniable stretches of waste and bog. No more flagrant instance could be found of the confusion of the poetic spirit with its mere apparel than the present-day disparagement of Milton on account of his opinions and the puritanism he is supposed to have served.

From *Paradise Lost* I will quote two passages only—one well known, the other perhaps less familiar.

*'With thee conversing I forget all time,
All seasons and thir change, all please alike.
Sweet is the breath of morn, her rising sweet,
With charm of earliest Birds; pleasant the Sun
When first on this delightful Land he spreads
His orient Beams, on herb, tree, fruit, and flour,
Glistring with dew; fragrant the fertil earth
After soft showers; and sweet the coming on
Of grateful Eevning milde, then silent Night
With this her solemn Bird and this fair Moon,
And these the Gemms of Heav'n, her starrie train:
But neither breath of Morn when she ascends
With charm of earliest Birds, nor rising Sun
On this delightful land, nor herb, fruit, floure,
Glistring with dew, nor fragrance after showers,
Nor grateful Evening mild, nor silent Night
With this her solemn Bird, nor walk by Moon
Or glittering Starr-light without thee is sweet.'*

an Essay on English Poetry

*'Round he surveys, and well might, where he stood
So high above the circling Canopie
Of Night's extended shade; from Eastern Point
Of Libra to the fleecy Starr that bears
Andromeda farr off Atlantick Seas
Beyond th' Horizon; then from Pole to Pole
He views in bredth, and without longer pause
Down right into the Worlds first Region throws
His flight precipitant, and windes with ease
Through the pure marble Air his oblique way
Amongst innumerable Starrs, that shon
Stars distant, but nigh hand seemd other Worlds,
Or other Worlds they seemd, or happy Iles,
Like those Hesperian Gardens fam'd of old,
Fortunate Fields, and Groves and flourie Vales,
Thrice happy Iles, but who dwelt happy there
He stayd not to enquire.'*

Of Milton's other late poems, it must be said that *Paradise Regain'd* comes as a disappointing anti-climax; but *Samson Agonistes* reaches greater heights than ever, kindled as it was by Milton's anguish in his blindness.

*O dark, dark, dark, amid the blaze of noon,
Irrecoverably dark, total Eclipse
Without all hope of day!
O first created Beam, and thou great Word,
Let there be light, and light was over all;
Why am I thus bereav'd thy prime decree?
The Sun to me is dark
And silent as the Moon,
When she deserts the night
Hid in her vacant interlunar cave . . .*

The other poets of the century which followed the Restoration have of course been the chief victims of the prejudice I

The Sacred Fire:

have mentioned, by which a regard for certain aspects of nature and the acceptance of certain conventions about the passion of love became the touchstones of poetic 'truth'. Naturalness and artifice were set in opposition as a pair of mutually exclusive alternatives, the latter wholly evil. That prejudice was an inheritance from the nineteenth century, when an excessive admiration prevailed for the poets of what is called the Romantic Movement. Now I have tried to show that poetry may be engendered by many various passions, and those which possessed men's minds and hearts in this period were as valid as any others. Outwardly it began as a period of reaction against the sort of life imposed by the puritan rule; the pleasures of the town and the more profane Classical literature had been forbidden and were now to be enjoyed. That is sufficient to explain the new direction taken in the choice of matter. We find that satire, cynical wit, and truth to reason, have taken the place of romantic love, country pleasures and mystical or emotional religious themes as the exciting causes of poetry. Over all, as a unifying convention, was the new care for smooth versifying, born apparently of a new admiration for the Latin classics. This regard for conventional correctness and a revived fashion for the writing of verses united in what is outwardly a common form the elegant versifier with the poet of true vocation. This new Classicism has in our own time been applauded by critics of two fashionable schools so diverse as the adherents of tradition on the one hand and on the other those who deplore any romantic individualist departure from the general line. If what is called technical mastery, in the Classical manner, were the whole poetic achievement this would be the greatest period in English poetry; but in my own view poetic technique is simply the poet's power to embody his vision or express his feelings in rhythmical speech, not necessarily of one kind only and not always measured, orderly and rigidly restrained, and a convention that treats

an Essay on English Poetry

the English language as if it were a precise instrument like Latin or French is as arbitrary and limiting as the demand for 'poetic feeling' and 'truth to Nature' made by the opposing school. Much of the greatness of English poetry springs from the very fact that the language is not precise but suggestive, evocative, and full of echoes. It is reasonable to say, however, of this period that it was one of those rare times when a passion for the art of versification, rather than any larger issue, was a main preoccupation of some (but not all) of the poets themselves, and the Latin fashion merely stressed the more coldly formal and artificial aspects of poetry. But where so much is manner, it is harder to distinguish what is truly creative. Romantic criticism frankly abandoned the task, accepting several impostors and preferring (for example) the costive tenderness of Pope's *Elegy* to his harder and more artificial but more brilliantly inspired and characteristic work, of which *The Rape of the Lock* is typical.

I should say a word here on the difficult question whether there may be degrees in the value of poetry according to the importance of its subject-matter. It may be engendered at one end of the scale by a passionate care for style and at the other by vision and prophetic insight into the deeper concerns of the human race. From the point of view of one concerned with pure poetry, importance of subject is irrelevant; but if the work is considered as a contribution to the heritage of the race, it is by no means irrelevant, and so much the worse for pure poetry it may be said. It is obvious that the latter sort of poetry stirs most of us more profoundly; its incandescence is fiercer than the none-the-less authentic flame of the other.

Within the century, at least three distinct movements may be detected. The hard, strong and clear but still animated and Baroque art of Dryden had its outrider in the precocious Cowley, while the easy manners of the time had a reflection in the songs of Etherege and the Restoration dramatists and

The Sacred Fire:

the poems of Cotton, who might have seemed to belong to the age of Marvell but for a certain slipshod cynicism. The songs of the period have the same wit and grace and ironic sentiment and are the townsman's version of Marvell's country poems. The impudence of Cowley in his *Chronicle*—

Margarita *first* possest,
If I remember well, my brest;
Margarita, *first* of all;
But when a while the wanton Maid,
With my restless Heart had plaid,
Martha took the flying Ball.

the exquisitely turned compliments and cynical philosophy of Sir George Etherege—

It is not, Celia, in our power
To say how long our love will last;
It may be we within this hour
May lose those joys we now do taste:
The blessed, that immortal be,
From change in love are only free.

Then since we mortal lovers are,
Ask not how long our love may last;
But while it does, let us take care
Each minute be with pleasure pass'd:
Were it not madness to deny
To live because we're sure to die?

And even the songs of Dryden owed a great deal to Marvell. But Dryden had another more prophetic side, in which his eagle-winged versification had fuller play, in such poems as the *Ode* to the memory of Mrs. Killigrew;

Thou youngest Virgin Daughter of the Skies,
Made in the last Promotion of the Blest;
Whose Palms, new-plucked from Paradise,

an Essay on English Poetry

*In spreading Branches more sublimely rise,
Rich with Immortal Green, above the rest:*

as well as in the slashing satire of *Absalom and Achitophel* and above all in the Baroque stage scenery of *Alexander's Feast* and the rest.

Pope and Swift, with Matthew Prior, John Gay and other lesser men of the early part of the eighteenth century, belong to a more strictly Classical generation, with whom high finish and smoothness of diction were ruling passions. (But the most rigid verbal discipline could not mask the passion of indignation that flamed in Swift, nor could the utmost facility in Thomson hide an entire lack of poetic power). Pope was at his best in *The Rape of the Lock*, with its incomparable toilet-scene:

*And now, unveil'd, the Toilet stands display'd
Each Silver Vase in mystic Order laid.
First, rob'd in White, the Nymph intent adores
With Head uncover'd, the Cosmetic Pow'rs.
A heav'nly Image in the Glass appears,
To that she bends, to that her Eyes she rears;
Th' inferior Priestess, at her Altar's side,
Trembling, begins the sacred Rites of Pride.
Unnumber'd Treasures ope at once, and here
The various Off'rings of the World appear;
From each she nicely culls with curious Toil,
And decks the Goddess with the glitt'ring Spoil.
This Casket India's glowing Gems unlocks,
And all Arabia breathes from yonder Box.
The Tortoise here and Elephant unite,
Transformed to Combs, the speckled and the white.
Here Files of Pins extend their shining Rows,
Puffs, Powders, Patches, Bibles, Billet-doux.
Now awful Beauty puts on all its Arms;
The Fair each moment rises in her Charms,*

The Sacred Fire:

*Repairs her Smiles, awakens ev'ry Grace,
And calls forth all the Wonders of her Face;
Sees by Degrees a purer Blush arise,
And keener Lightrings quicken in her Eyes.*

Swift's anger found expression in irony, in fierce rebellion expressed in neat verses, in parodies of Virgil with such lines as

*Sweepings from Butchers Stalls, Dung, Guts and Blood,
Drown'd Puppies, stinking Sprats, all drench'd in Mud,
Dead Cats, and Turnip-Tops, come tumbling down the Flood.*

and the still more savage *Progress of Beauty*, with its anger at the fact of bodily decay

*And this is fair Diana's case;
For, all Astrologers maintain,
Each Night a Bit drops off her Face,
When Mortals say she's in her Wane:*

*While Partridge wisely shows the Cause
Efficient of the Moon's Decay,
That Cancer with his pois'nous Claws
Attacks her in the milky Way:*

On the other hand the fine compliments of the Restoration poets were equalled if not surpassed by Matthew Prior and his contemporaries:

*In the Dispute whate'er I said,
My Heart was by my Tongue bely'd;
And in my Looks you might have read,
How much I argu'd on your side.*

*You, far from Danger as from Fear,
Might have sustain'd an open Fight:
For seldom your Opinions err:
Your Eyes are always in the right.*

an Essay on English Poetry

The graceful art thus created by Pope and Prior and James Thomson was widely practised throughout the next hundred years or so, and to the great mass of pleasant but uninspired and 'insincere' verses so produced is no doubt due the long-standing prejudice against the eighteenth century. The poets of the next generation, with this expressive instrument at their command, added a rich and complex harmony to the rather bare writing of the previous period. Gray and Collins, and in a more casual way Oliver Goldsmith in his one serious work, were poets as true as any in the centuries before and after, and only the occasional flatness of a conventional epithet could obscure the fact. Collins indeed, is one of the greatest of all English poets, a magician capable of every enchantment. His case is especially valuable since he showed that the highest level may be reached by a poet working in and through the idiom of his time, however 'artificial' and unpromising that may appear to later generations. Dying young, he left but a small body of work, most of which is in consequence very familiar. I therefore refrain from quoting more than a few lines from the flawless *Ode to Evening*, every word of which seems charged with poetic feeling:

*Or if chill blust'ring Winds, or driving Rain,
Prevent my willing Feet, be mine the Hut,
That from the Mountain's side.
Views Wilds, and swelling Floods,
And Hamlets brown, and dim-discover'd Spires,
And hears their simple Bell, and marks o'er all
Thy Dewy Fingers draw
The gradual dusky Veil.*

The poets of the last thirty years of the eighteenth century belong in some senses to a transition. Sometimes conscious in the work of Gray of the graceful fancy of the contemporary Rococo, one is tempted to see in the often cloying sweetness of Cowper a parallel with the Neo-Classical

The Sacred Fire:

sentiment of the age of Josiah Wedgwood and the early *Louis-Seize*. When this was kept in check by the restraint of his beautiful and very personal sort of blank verse Cowper showed himself a poet of the highest rank.

*Nor rural sights alone, but rural sounds,
Exhilarate the spirit, and restore
The tone of languid Nature. Mighty winds,
That sweep the skirt of some far-spreading wood
Of ancient growth, make music not unlike
The dash of ocean on his winding shore,
And lull the spirit while they fill the mind;
Unnumber'd branches waving in the blast,
And all their leaves fast flutt'ring, all at once.
Nor less composure waits upon the roar
Of distant floods, or on the softer voice
Of neighb'ring fountain, or of rills that slip
Through the cleft rock, and, chiming as they fall
Upon loose pebbles, lose themselves at length
In matted grass, that with a livelier green
Betrays the secret of their silent course.*

In Cowper's best work there is a new naturalness of diction which anticipates the Romantics, though the gap is usually held to be bridged rather by the wayward and rebellious art of William Blake. But while Blake's irregular rhythms and individual fancy may justify this, his diction and much of his sentiment show him, I think, to be in the direct line of the eighteenth-century poets. Blake's vision, like Traherne's, was innocent, and it was his special poetic gift to express that innocence with utter simplicity and disregard of falsifying correctness, as a child draws. Yet he belongs to the eighteenth century, as this song shows:

*How sweet I roam'd from field to field
And tasted all the summer's pride,*

an Essay on English Poetry

*Till I the prince of love beheld
Who in the sunny beams did glide!*

*He shew'd me lilies for my hair,
And blushing roses for my brow;
He led me through his gardens fair
Where all his golden pleasures grow.*

*With sweet May dews my wings were wet,
And Phoebus fir'd my vocal rage;
He caught me in his silken net,
And shut me in his golden cage.*

*He loves to sit and hear me sing,
Then, laughing, sports and plays with me;
Then stretches out my golden wing,
And mocks my loss of liberty.*

Yet nothing could be more childlike than this:

*Farewell, green fields and happy groves,
Where flocks have took delight.
Where lambs have nibbled, silent moves
The feet of angels bright;
Unseen they pour blessing,
And joy without ceasing,
On each bud and blossom,
And each sleeping bosom.*

No man can avoid sharing the poetic atmosphere or inspiration of his time, however much he may outwardly rebel or try to escape from it. Even the unfortunate Christopher Smart, whose madness is supposed to have freed him from the evil conventions which tied his fellow poets, was obviously of their number, as a study of the language of the *Song to David* will quickly show.

The revolution in poetry that came just before the turn of the century was undoubtedly due to the same ferment or

The Sacred Fire:

wave of ideas and aspirations which had produced the political revolution in France. Claimed as a return to Nature and a rediscovery of Truth, it secured also an exciting return to simple diction, purged of the conventional pomposities into which the eighteenth century had often lapsed. The movement was also sustained by another influence. It is difficult now to assess the extent to which the movement was indebted to the traditional ballads, whose rediscovery and publication by Bishop Percy in 1765 stands as a landmark in English poetry. In the preface to their *Lyrical Ballads*, published in 1798, Wordsworth and Coleridge announced their intention of ascertaining 'how far the language of conversation . . . is adapted for the purpose of poetic pleasure'. They protested against the 'gaudiness' of 'modern writers' and feared that their language would seem 'too familiar'. To this doctrine Coleridge, with his metaphysical bent, imaginative gifts and ear for the subtlest undertones, was less faithful than Wordsworth, whose art lay more in the transfiguration of common events than the narration of extraordinary ones, as in the old ballads with which by their title they claimed kinship. Both *The Ancient Mariner* and *Christabel* show Coleridge as an inheritor of the ballad tradition. More than that, both are compact of words transfigured and made to dance in a pattern which takes the reader 'over the edge':

*The moving Moon went up the sky,
And no where did abide:
Softly she was going up,
And a star or two beside—*

*Her beams bemoaned the sultry main,
Like April hoar-frost spread;
But where the ship's huge shadow lay
The charmed water burnt away
A still and awful red.*

an Essay on English Poetry
Beyond the shadow of the ship,
I watched the water-snakes:
They moved in tracks of shining white,
And when they reared, the elfish light
Fell off in hoary flakes.

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black,
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue
Their beauty might declare:
A spring of love gushed from my heart,
And I blessed them unaware:
Sure my kind saint took pity on me,
And I blessed them unaware.

The selfsame moment I could pray:
And from my neck so free
The Albatross fell off, and sank
Like lead into the sea.

Wordsworth's art was less far-fetched, but its best no less a gift of transfigured words, frequently recording, as it happens, experiences of Nature transfigured. *Tintern Abbey* ranks with Milton's *Allegro* and *Penseroso* as one of the best-loved of all English poems, and from it I quote with reluctance these sublime but familiar lines:

Nor less, I trust,
To them I may have owed another gift,
Of aspect more sublime; that blessed mood,
In which the burthen of the mystery,
In which the heavy and the weary weight
Of all this unintelligible world,

The Sacred Fire:

*Is lightened:—that serene and blessed mood,
In which the affections gently lead us on,—
Until, the breath of this corporeal frame
And even the motion of our human blood
Almost suspended, we are laid asleep
In body, and become a living soul:
While with an eye made quiet by the power
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,
We see into the life of things.*

To Shelley the liberation meant the indulgence at the prompting of the passions of the time in a riot of abstractions, whose very facility and lack of discipline too often allow their poetic force to spend itself ineffectively in a torrent of empty words. But Shelley's onsets are sometimes magnificent and sustain to the end compositions that would otherwise lapse into wordiness and insignificance.

*When the lamp is shattered
The light in the dust lies dead. . . .*

*O world, O life, O time
on whose last steps I climb . . .*

Away! the moor is dark beneath the Moon . . .

The parallels between the Romantic poets and the English landscape painters are not always noticed. They stand in much the same relation to Collins and Gray and William Cowper as J. R. Cozens and Thomas Girtin stand to Richard Wilson and Francis Towne. The romantic naturalism of the followers of Cozens, with their increasing disregard of formal qualities and reliance on 'expression' holds the same hint of ultimate failure as the contemporary poetic creed of Wordsworth and Shelley. A parallel still less often observed is that linking the late Classical or *Empire* style in building and decoration with the more grandiloquent manner at times adopted by Shelley and with the forthright rhythms of

an Essay on English Poetry

Walter Scott. In Byron too this aspect is conspicuous, though in my own opinion his facile and witty verses are not poetry at all. Keats, as the youngest and most gifted of the group, inherited all their discoveries and fulfilled all their promises. The hint of an excessive sweetness in his early poems, the hyperboles and romantic languishments so little tolerable to us to-day, have largely disappeared in his later work, which culminates in the *Odes* and the matchless *Hyperion*. The colour and music of the *Odes* need no illustration here, but the wonders of the longer poem are less well-known :

*As when, upon a tranced summer night,
Those green-rob'd senators of mighty woods,
Tall oaks, branch-charmed by the earnest stars,
Dream, and so dream all night without a stir,
Save from one gradual solitary gust
Which comes upon the silence, and dies off,
As if the ebbing air had but one wave:*

*He look'd upon them all,
And in each face he saw a gleam of light,
But splendider in Saturn's, whose hoar locks
Shone like the bubbling foam about a keel
When the prow sweeps into a midnight cove.
In pale and silver silence they remain'd,
Till suddenly a splendour, like the morn,
Pervaded all the beetling gloomy steeps,
All the sad spaces of oblivion,
And every gulf, and every chasm old,
And every height, and every sullen depth,
Voiceless, or hoarse with loud tormented streams:
And all the everlasting cataracts,
And all the headlong torrents far and near,
Mantled before in darkness and huge shade,*

The Sacred Fire:

Now saw the light and made it terrible.

It was Hyperion:

Of the aftermath of the Romantic movement, still not ended, it is difficult to offer a calm opinion, so disastrous has it been for poetry. Sincerity and an individual accent may no doubt be claimed for some of the numerous poets of the second quarter of the nineteenth century, for the outpourings of Elizabeth Barrett Browning and the picturesque defiance and shrill heroics of Emily Brontë, but as poetry it is largely derivative, while the bellowings of the unspeakable Macaulay are simply not poetry at all. The romantic vocabulary had become as empty and the poetic attitude or posture as false as the productions of that Gothic Revival which also enjoyed its heyday in this very period.

The impulse to a new or renascent mode came when a younger generation of poets found something deeply felt to write about, when they were stirred by a new passion of indignation and protest. The colour and imagery of the later Romantics were then taken up and put to a new use by a new sensibility and seriousness. The decades following the Napoleonic Wars were a period of the grossest materialism, when the Industrial Revolution made its greatest advances, and out of the revolt against this and the reaffirmation of religious belief in early Victorian times was born the movement to which belonged such diverse poets as Browning, Tennyson and Arnold. Each felt himself a defender of truth, and each created for himself a new poetic instrument. Browning was at his most personal and most truly a poet when ruggedly arguing in blank verse, with flashes of imagery and bursts of fierce compelling rhythm, than when tied to rhymed metres, unconvincingly melodious. I have not read all Browning's longer poems, but I can hardly believe that they contain anything finer than this, from *Bishop Blougram's Apology*:

an Essay on English Poetry

*Pure faith indeed—you know not what you ask!
Naked belief in God the Omnipotent,
Omniscient, Omnipresent, sears too much
The sense of conscious creatures to be borne.
It were the seeing Him, no flesh shall dare.
Some think, Creation's meant to show Him forth:
I say, it's meant to hide Him all it can,
And that's what all the blessed evil's for.
Its use in Time is to environ us,
Our breath, our drop of dew, with shield enough
Against that sight till we can bear its stress.
Under a vertical sun, the exposed brain
And lidless eye and disemprisoned heart
Less certainly would wither up at once
Than mind, confronted with the truth of Him.
But time and earth case-harden us to live;
The feeblest sense is trusted most; the child
Feels God a moment, ichors o'er the place,
Plays on and grows to be a man like us.
With me, faith means perpetual unbelief
Kept quiet like the snake 'neath Michael's foot
Who stands calm just because he feels it writhe.*

Tennyson too wrote some of his most moving poetry on themes that challenged his faith in the ultimate goodness of existence. His astonishing command of language at once descriptively exact and charged with poetic feeling was heightened by a didactic or reforming purpose; left to narrative his art often declined into little more than decoration. But the best of Tennyson is pure poetry:

*And come, for Love is of the valley, come,
For Love is of the valley, come thou down
And find him; by the happy threshold, he,
Or hand in hand with Plenty in the maize,
Or red with spirted purple of the vats*

The Sacred Fire:

*With Death and Morning on the Silver Horns,
Nor wilt thou snare him in the white ravine,
Nor find him dropt upon the firths of ice,
That huddling slant in furrow-cloven falls
To roll the torrent out of dusky doors:
But follow; let the torrent dance thee down
To find him in the valley; let the wild
Lean-headed Eagles yelp alone, and leave
The monstrous ledges there to slope, and spill
Their thousand wreaths of dangling water-smoke,
That like a broken purpose waste in air:
So waste not thou; but come . . .*

Arnold's was a smaller gift, springing at first less directly from the problems of the time though finally caught up and destroyed rather than made by them. How great a loss English poetry suffered by Arnold's addiction to seriousness is shown by a comparison of the argumentation of *Empedocles* with the surpassing beauty of *The Strayed Reveller*; this last, though little known, is one of the finest poems in the language and one of the nearest to pure poetry:

*The Gods are happy.
They turn on all sides
Their shining eyes:
And see, below them,
The Earth, and men.*

*They see the Ferry
On the broad, clay-laden
Lone Chorasmian stream: thereon
With snort and strain,
Two horses, strongly swimming, tow
The ferry-boat, with woven ropes
To either bow
Firm-harness'd by the mane:—a Chief,*

an Essay on English Poetry

*With shout and shaken spear
Stands at the prow, and guides them: but astern,
The cowering Merchants, in long robes,
Sit pale beside their wealth
Of silk-bales and of balsam-drops,
Of gold and ivory,
Of torquoise earth and amethyst,
Jasper and chalcedony,
And milk-barr'd onyx stones.
The loaded boat swings groaning
In the yellow eddies.
The Gods behold them.*

*The old Silenus
Came, lolling in the sunshine,
From the dewy forest coverts,
This way, at noon.
Sitting by me, while his Fauns
Down at the water side
Sprinkled and smooth'd
His drooping garland,
He told me these things.*

Rossetti and his sister belonged to the same period, but by race more than half Italian shared only in that part of the early Victorian inspiration which was sensuous and emotional rather than intellectual.

The early Victorian upheaval, with its optimism and its doubt, its challenge to a complacent materialism, in my view lapsed soon after the middle of the century into a dull and heavy indifference, stifling to the poetic spirit. It is difficult, no doubt, when so recent a period is discussed, to avoid a charge of picking one's examples to suit one's arguments, and an accusation of poetic sterility brought against the mid-Victorian age must appear at first sight entirely unjustified. Tennyson and Arnold were still writing and Swinburne

The Sacred Fire:

pouring out volume after volume. A charge of hardness too will bring a storm of protest; but I find it unavoidable. Meredith, born in the same year as Rossetti, could (when not showing off) find a difficult vein of poetry in a didactic utterance that was stirring and beautiful as well as hard, as in the shouted admonition in his finest poem

*Mists more lone for the sheep-bell enwrap
Nights that tardily let slip a morn
Paler than moons, and on noontide's lap
Flame dies cold, like the rose late born.
Rose born late, born withered in bud!—
I, even I, for a zenith of sun
Cry, to fulfil me, nourish my blood:
O for a day of the long light, one!*

*Master the blood, nor read by chills,
Earth admonishes. Hast thou ploughed,
Sown, reaped, harvested grain for the mills,
Thou hast the light over shadow of cloud.
Steadily eyeing, before that wail
Animal-infant, thy mind began,
Momently nearer me: should sight fail,
Plod in the track of the husbandman.*

The other mid-Victorians were either hard or mere decorators. The hard nature and fluent pen of Coventry Patmore combined to produce a mere simulacrum of poetry. Swinburne, with all his metrical skill and violence was never stirred deeply enough to become a poet; his nature was too shallow. The art of William Morris was decorative only, in verse as in the other arts he practised, charming but with no great depth or resonance. Stevenson again was a *poseur* and a decorator; while no harder or shallower man of genius ever wrote verses than W. E. Henley. Robert Bridges was an extremely skilful versifier, with a remarkable ear, whose

an Essay on English Poetry

compositions are at times so near to poetry as to deserve a place in my anthology. Gerard Manley Hopkins, unlike his friend Bridges, was scarcely a cloistered craftsman quietly experimenting with rhythms and metrical devices; but excitingly beautiful as his best poems are I feel that they show overmuch self-conscious ingenuity and belong essentially if only invertedly to a stony period of complacency and repression, when artists were not allowed to be more than decorators, when 'applied art' became the recognized term used to describe the decorated products of mechanized industry. In Hopkins, nevertheless, the fire of poetry is at times revealed blindingly, but not so much in his more sensationally and self-consciously 'original' poems, such as *The Windhover*, as in the severe and difficult *Wreck of the Deutschland*:

*I admire Thee, master of the tides,
Of the yore-flood, of the year's fall;
The recurb and the recovery of the gulf's sides
The girth of it and the wharf of it and the wall;
Stanching, quenching ocean of a motionable mind
Ground of being, and granite of it; past all
Grasp God, throned behind
Death with a sovereignty that heeds but hides, bodes but abides.*

Thomas Hardy almost alone of the poets who began to write in that time had the sensibility, the simple transmuting gift the others lacked. His was a prophetic inspiration, contradicting in some degree the generalizations made on previous pages. Living on through the '90's (whose melancholy he may have inspired) he had with his jiggling ballad metres as little in common with the stylists and rhetoricians of that time as with his own contemporaries, and found his poetic kindred at last in the Georgians, only when an old man.

*My spirit will not haunt the mound
Above my breast,*

The Sacred Fire:

*But travel, memory-possessed,
To where my tremulous being found
Life largest, best.*

*My phantom-footed shape will go
When nightfall grays
Hither and thither along the ways
I and another used to know
In backward days.*

*And there you'll find me, if a jot
You still should care
For me, and for my curious air;
If otherwise, then I shall not,
For you, be there.*

Altogether and in spite of these exceptions I am forced to believe that the two or three decades after about 1860 were poetically sterile from some spiritual cause, hard to diagnose or describe, but probably similar to that which had afflicted the Commonwealth and was later on to blight the decade after the Boer War.

In the distinct period known in literary history as the Eighteen-Nineties a new movement was born, of a kind rare in England but common in France, on the one hand inspiring a new conscience in craftsmanship, conveniently summed up in the phrase 'art for art's sake', and on the other rejecting the long-current scientific and middle-class optimism in a profound melancholy, cynical hedonism, or *fin-de-siècle* despair. That may be thought to be an inadequate description of Francis Thompson, but a behaviourist criticism will always clearly separate performance from a profession of belief, and distinguish the burden of what I have called the actual poem from the dogmas the poet was consciously stating. In much of Thompson, though the doctrine purports to be Catholic, the feeling is one of black despair, in line with that of most of his contemporaries.

an Essay on English Poetry

... His heart is builded

*For pride, for potency, infinity,
All heights, all deeps, and all immensities,
Arrased with purple like the house of kings,
To stall the grey-rat, and the carrion-worm
Statelily lodge. Mother of mysteries!
Sayer of dark sayings in a thousand tongues,
Who bringest forth no saying yet so dark
As we ourselves, thy darkest! We the young,
In a little thought, in a little thought,
At last confront thee, and ourselves in thee,
And wake disgarmented of glory: as one
On a mount standing, and against him stands,
On the mount adverse, crowned with westering rays,
The golden sun, and they two brotherly
Gaze each on each;
He faring down
To the dull vale, his Godhead peels from him
Till he can scarcely spurn the pebble—
For nothingness of new-found mortality—
That mutinies against his gallèd foot.
Littly he sets him to the daily way,
With all around the valleys growing grave,
And known things changed and strange; but he holds on,
Though all the land of light be widowed,
In a little thought.*

Ernest Dowson, A. E. Housman, and W. B. Yeats were plainly if not avowedly of this school of the Nineties, as was Stephen Phillips, whose total loss of critical favour to-day is due I think as much to reaction after his spell of extreme popularity, as to an excess of sweetness in a spring of unquestionable poetry. The hard but strongly-coloured art of John Davidson is similarly disregarded with the same injustice, largely for reasons of fashion. Of these I shall not

The Sacred Fire:

quote A. E. Housman, for whose work I have an idolatrous admiration, or W. B. Yeats, whose later poems I find even more admirable. Phillips and Davidson both enriched English poetry with some beautiful blank verse of a rare and personal quality, as these extracts will show

*But if I live with Idas, then we two
On the low earth shall prosper hand in hand
In odours of the open field, and live
In peaceful noises of the farm, and watch
The pastoral fields burned by the setting sun.
And he shall give me passionate children, not
Some radiant god that will despise me quite,
But clambering limbs and little hearts that err.
And I shall sleep beside him in the night,
And fearful from some dream shall touch his hand
Secure; or at some festival we two
Will wander through the lighted city streets;
And in the crowd I'll take his arm and feel
Him closer for the press. So shall we live.
And though the first sweet sting of love be past,
The sweet that almost venom is; though youth,
With tender and extravagant delight,
The first and secret kiss by twilight hedge,
The insane farewell repeated o'er and o'er,
Pass off; there shall succeed a faithful peace;
Beautiful friendship tried by sun and wind,
Durable from the daily dust of life.*

—from Stephen Philips: *Marpessa*

*I haunt the hills that overlook the sea.
Here in the Winter like a meshwork shroud
The sifted snow reveals the perished land,
And powders wisps of knotgrass dank and dead
That trail like faded locks on mouldering skulls
Unearthed from shallow burial. With the Spring*

an Essay on English Poetry

*The west-wind thunders through the budding hedge
That stems the furrowed steep—a sound of drums,
Of gongs and muted cymbals; yellow breasts
And brown wings whirl in gusts, fly chaffering, drop,
And surge in gusts again; in wooded coombs
The hyacinth with purple diapers
The russet beechmast, and cowslips hoard
Their virgin gold in lucent chalices;
The sombre furze, all suddenly attired
In rich brocade, the enterprise in chief
And pageant of the season, overrides
The rolling land and girds the bosomed plain
That strips her green robe to a saffron shore
And steps into the surf where threads and scales
And arabesques of blue and emerald wave
Begin to damascene the iron sea;
While faint from upland fold and covert peal
The sheep-bell and the cuckoo's mellow chime.*

—from John Davidson: *The Testament of a Man forbid*

Here too belongs the forgotten tragic talent of Charlotte Mew, who wrote half-a-dozen flawless and unforgettable poems:

*Oh! Sorrow, Sorrow, scarce I knew
Your name when, shaking down the may
In sport, a little child, I grew
Afraid to find you at my play.
I heard it ere I looked at you;
You sang it softly as you came
Bringing your little boughs of yew
To fling across my gayest game.*

*Oh! Sorrow, Sorrow, was I fair
That when I decked me for a bride,
You met me stepping down the stair
And led me from my lover's side?*

The Sacred Fire:

*Was I so dear you could not spare
The maid to love, the child to play,
But coming always unaware,
Must bid and beckon me away?*

*Oh! Sorrow, Sorrow, is my bed
So wide and warm that you must lie
Upon it; toss your weary head
And stir my slumber with your sigh?*

*I left my love at your behest,
I waved your little boughs of yew,
But Sorrow, Sorrow, let me rest,
For oh! I cannot sleep with you.*

This highly wrought and often sophisticated and self-conscious poetry of the Nineties was apt to stiffen into a pompous grandiloquence (as in William Watson) and its non-moral hardness of content to become mere insensitive crudeness and brutality (as in Kipling), and it was chiefly in this manner that verse continued to be written in the years after the Boer War. No more stifling atmosphere has ever weighed upon English poetry than that of the Edwardian era. Mr. de la Mare had begun to write, but had not found his true voice; others unquestionably sincere seemed unable to avoid the worn poetic *clichés* of the previous decade. Davidson was still to compose some of his most beautiful blank verse, but its tormented spirit is as much a mirror of the age as of his own personal sufferings, while Thomas Hardy alone continued to write in the effortless and beautiful manner already created by him thirty years before.

Reaching the second decade of the present century I am conscious that an impartial critical attitude is at this point impossible for me. The poets who became collectively aware of their reforming and creative mission when 'E. M.' published his first anthology of *Georgian Poetry* in 1911 were the poets of my first adult understanding of their art. Their

an Essay on English Poetry

sensitive and flexible rhythms and living natural language, no less than their delight in the English country scene, their irony and wit and hatred of cant and over-statement, were qualities that seemed then to me, and must still seem, the most valuable side of the English poetic temperament. All those represented in the *Georgian Anthologies* shared in their several ways in that renascence, which the work of Thomas Hardy had heralded. Above all, D. H. Lawrence, Robert Frost, Edward Thomas and Mr. Walter de la Mare remain for me poets in the greatest English tradition. The genius of Lawrence was often obscured in peevish complainings, but in his inspired moments, with his apparently effortless choice of the significant word, his haunting music and transfiguring power, he is to be ranked with Shakespeare himself.

Such a movement was bound to be short-lived, lasting hardly as long as the early-Caroline renascence with which it had so much in common. It was ultimately destroyed by the War, sometimes lapsing at the end into a grievous sentimentality. What was in some ways a reaction was in fact started in the year before the War in the self-styled Imagist movement, whose members announced that it stood for hard precision and concentration in language and imagery. In actual performance, however, the most significant Imagist poetry depended for its value on associations and symbolism often of a vague and elusive kind, wrought in a manner subsequently developed by Mr. T. S. Eliot, who was in fact for a time associated with the movement. It is this relationship rather than its positive achievement which gives the short-lived movement its historical importance. In my own opinion the most beautiful poetry of the original Imagist inspiration was written not by a member of the group but by Mr. Herbert Read in his early *Eclogues*. I refrain from quoting here any poems of this period (a selection is in the anthology), but I give here instead one of the last and finest poems of D. H. Lawrence, and one from the astonishing late

The Sacred Fire:

flowering of W. B. Yeats. The form of the latter, with its complete disregard of logical coherence, has been the inspiration (or has shared the inspiration) of some of the most adventurous recent poetry; the other maintained the free, direct and spontaneous but no less beautiful utterance which I have called Shakespearean.

*The unpurged images of day recede;
The Emperor's drunken soldiery are abed;
Night resonance recedes, night-walkers' song
After great cathedral gong;
A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains
All that man is,
All mere complexities,
The fury and the mire of human veins.*

*Before me floats an image, man or shade,
Shade more than man, more image than a shade;
For Hades' bobbin bound in mummy-cloth
May unwind the winding path;
A mouth that has no moisture and no breath
Breathless mouths may summon;
I hail the superhuman;
I call it death-in-life and life-in-death.*

*Miracle, bird or golden handiwork,
More miracle than bird or handiwork,
Planted on the starlit golden bough,
Can like the cocks of Hades crow,
Or, by the moon embittered, scorn aloud
In glory of changeless metal
Common bird or petal
And all complexities of mire or blood.*

*At midnight on the Emperor's pavement flit
Flames no faggot feeds, nor steel has lit,
Nor storm disturbs, flames begotten of flame,*

an Essay on English Poetry

*Where blood-begotten spirits come
And all complexities of fury leave,
Dying into a dance,
An agony of trance,
An agony of flame that cannot singe a sleeve.*

*Astraddle on the dolphin's mire and blood,
Spirit after spirit! The smithies break the flood,
The golden smithies of the Emperor!
Marbles of the dancing floor
Break bitter furies of complexity,
Those images that yet
Fresh images beget,
That dolphin-torn, that gong-tormented sea.*

—from W. B. Yeats: *Byzantium*

*And if to-night my soul may find her peace
in sleep, and sink in good oblivion,
and in the morning wake like a new-opened flower
then I have been dipped again in God, and new created.*

*And if, as weeks go round, in the dark of the moon
my spirit darkens and goes out, and soft strange gloom
pervades my movements and my thoughts and words
then shall I know that I am walking still
with God, we are close together now the moon's in shadow.*

*And if, as autumn deepens and darkens
I feel the pain of falling leaves, and stems that break in storms
and trouble and dissolution and distress
and then the softness of deep shadows folding, folding
around my soul and spirit, around my lips
so sweet, like a swoon, or more like the drowse of a low, sad song
singing darker than the nightingale, on, on to the solstice
and the silence of short days, the silence of the year, the shadow,*

The Sacred Fire:

*then I shall know that my life is moving still
with the dark earth, and drenched
with the deep oblivion of earth's lapse and renewal.
And if, in the changing phases of man's life
I fall in sickness and in misery
my wrists seem broken and my heart seems dead
and strength is gone, and my life
is only the leavings of a life:*

*and still, among it all, snatches of lovely oblivion, and snatches of
renewal
odd, wintry flowers upon the withered stem, yet new, strange
flowers
such as my life has not brought forth before, new blossoms of me,
then I must know that still
I am in the hands of the unknown God,
he is breaking me down to his own oblivion
to send me forth on a new morning, a new man.*

—from D. H. Lawrence: *Shadows*

Later movements concern contemporaries, and are therefore perhaps (in Saintsbury's phrase) subjects for conversation rather than criticism. They are too near for a final judgment. What is genuinely creative in much that is excitingly experimental can be distinguished only after many readings, always with an open mind and listening ear, and the small choice of recent poems included in my anthology (by W. H. Auden, Stephen Spender, Louis Macneice and C. Day Lewis) was put forward as no more than a tentative and personal one. I claimed no more than that these poems seemed to me to belong to significant movements of the same order as those of the past here demonstrated. But this admission of uncertainty cannot, I think, affect the claims of the two rather older men already mentioned, whose poetry reveals more than any other the deep spiritual wounds left by the First World War. I find the

an Essay on English Poetry

beauty of Mr. Eliot's poems and their profound despair—a despair apparently too great for direct utterance—entirely at variance with his professed belief, as critic, in impersonal forms and the traditions of Church and State. Mr. Read's beautiful and terrible poems, though so different in colour and movement, must surely have the same spiritual origin. The younger men, united in a justifiable pessimism about the state of the world, find a natural fitness in an art in revolt against facile music and poetic *clichés*, against anything that could be accused of prettiness, glossing, or acceptance. The right to use any theme, however prosaic or unpleasant, is once more affirmed. The poetry they write has a hard bony texture and vivid dissonant colour not unlike that of contemporary painting and music. The use of harsh contrasts, oblique reference and ironical laughter, has much in common with Surrealism and seems to have been derived from Mr. Eliot; but Mr. Yeats also employed this new technique for some of his finest later poems, and this was as remarkable a case as Hardy's anticipation of the poetic outlook of the Georgians. Much has been written about these younger poets, but hitherto their apologists have been content to explain them, more or less obscurely, in terms of their meaning, language or imagery and their relation to the world of to-day and its 'problems'. From a more detached point of view their poetic merit would appear to lie rather in a singular beauty of rhythm, of words brought into a new and striking pattern of sound and sense depending on none of the more obvious resources of the poetry of the past; it is a melody that is comparable with that of much contemporary music, hard to recognize at a first hearing, when every note seems wrong. A detached point of view moreover allows it to be seen that this original character, achieved in common by at least three of these younger men, may readily be linked through Wilfred Owen to the English tradition of Herbert, Wordsworth and Thomas Hardy. It is in fact original work growing out of the

The Sacred Fire:

tradition, extending and enriching it. That the tradition exists is undeniable, and though I have in this note stressed the fact of differences it is obvious that some common characters may be found, especially by strangers, in all English poetry. It is unlikely, however, that these characters have ever been consciously felt or sought after by original poets (they are like the air we breathe), and what has been called respect for tradition is in this matter best shown, not by adherence to any rules, or the attempted suppression of personality, but by a respectful attitude towards the achievements of the past, which have created our language, with its wealth of evocative words, and on which all contemporary effort rests. Like the final state of perfection which is poetry itself, this living traditional character is attained not by renouncing personality but through it. For it seems certain that the greatest work in poetry as in other arts has never been done with a full consciousness of its ultimate aesthetic value. That value comes, as I have said, like a benediction on sincere, passionate and individual effort towards another end.

* * *

The anthology thus gathered from all these movements was deliberately made short enough to be read and re-read through as a book, suitably proportioned in its parts; it was not intended to be 'representative' or to be a repository for the whole treasure of English verse. I chose only what I considered the best, however well-known or unfamiliar it might be. But I make no claim to have read everything. I write here as a layman, not as a 'professed' or professional 'student of literature', and I should be sorry to think that there are not many beautiful poems, well known to others, still waiting to be discovered by me. Ignorance is fortunately not here a matter of professional disgrace. My intrusion into this field has been justified only if I have by suggesting a fresh and rewarding point of view enabled some others to share the various delights and profound satisfactions that English poetry

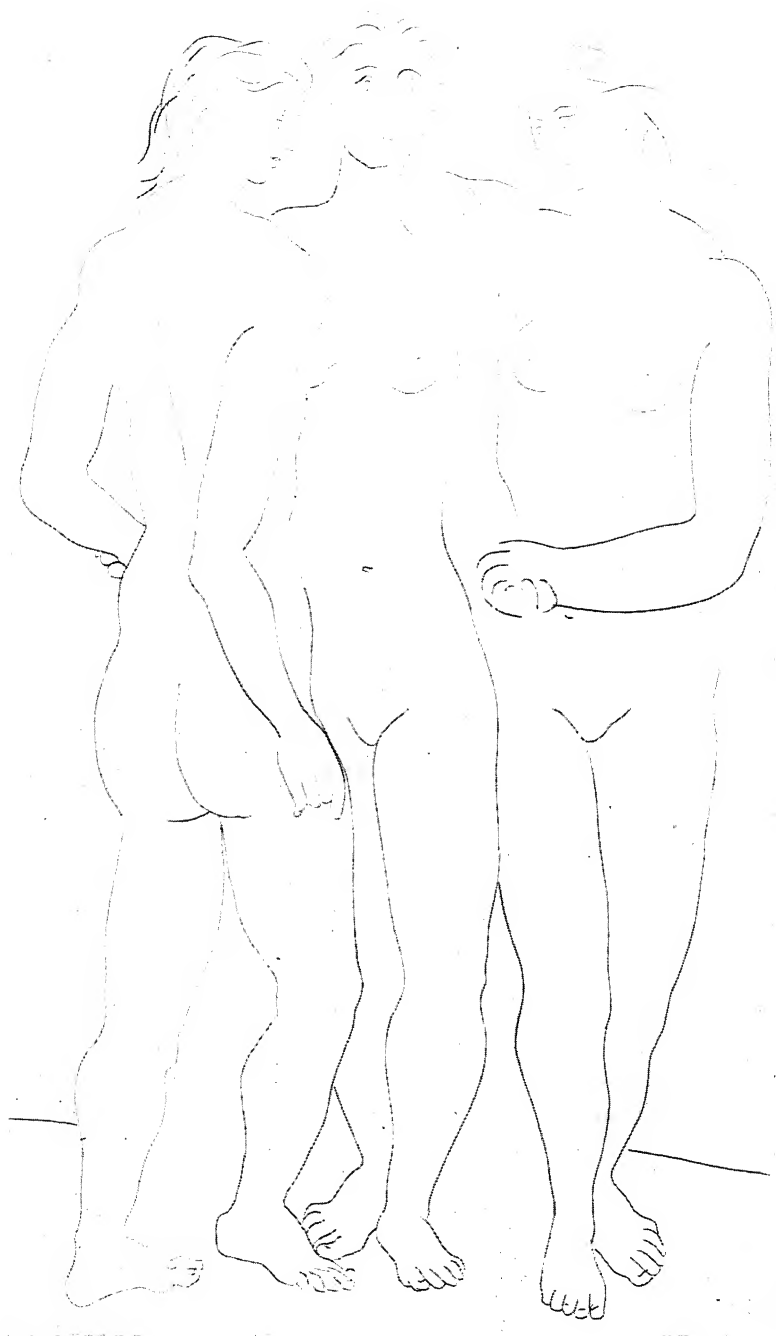
an Essay on English Poetry

may give. I should be especially glad to interest those who have suffered from school courses in 'poetry', but have escaped without an ineradicable distaste for the subject. I should like to think that this unprofessional book will restore their interest, particularly in modern poetry. The experience so common among the young, of a first and exclusive devotion to the nascent 'modern' art of their own day, is, I think, a natural and healthy one. No adjustment of the point of view is required and often enough the excitement of a revelation of beauty is strengthened by an enthusiasm for the poet's themes, together with (it must be granted) a satisfaction also at the bewilderment of elders and especially of the schoolmasters; these, by their boring presentation of the past only, had made into a hateful task what should have been a spontaneous delight. In such cases a sensitive mind unprejudiced by 'a training in appreciation' will normally proceed to the discovery that the poets of the past achieved a beauty no less authentic than their modern successors, though their occasions no longer have the urgency of those of the contemporary poet. A passionate liking for modern art is in fact the best possible starting point for an educational process designed to lead to an understanding of the past and a proper valuing of tradition.

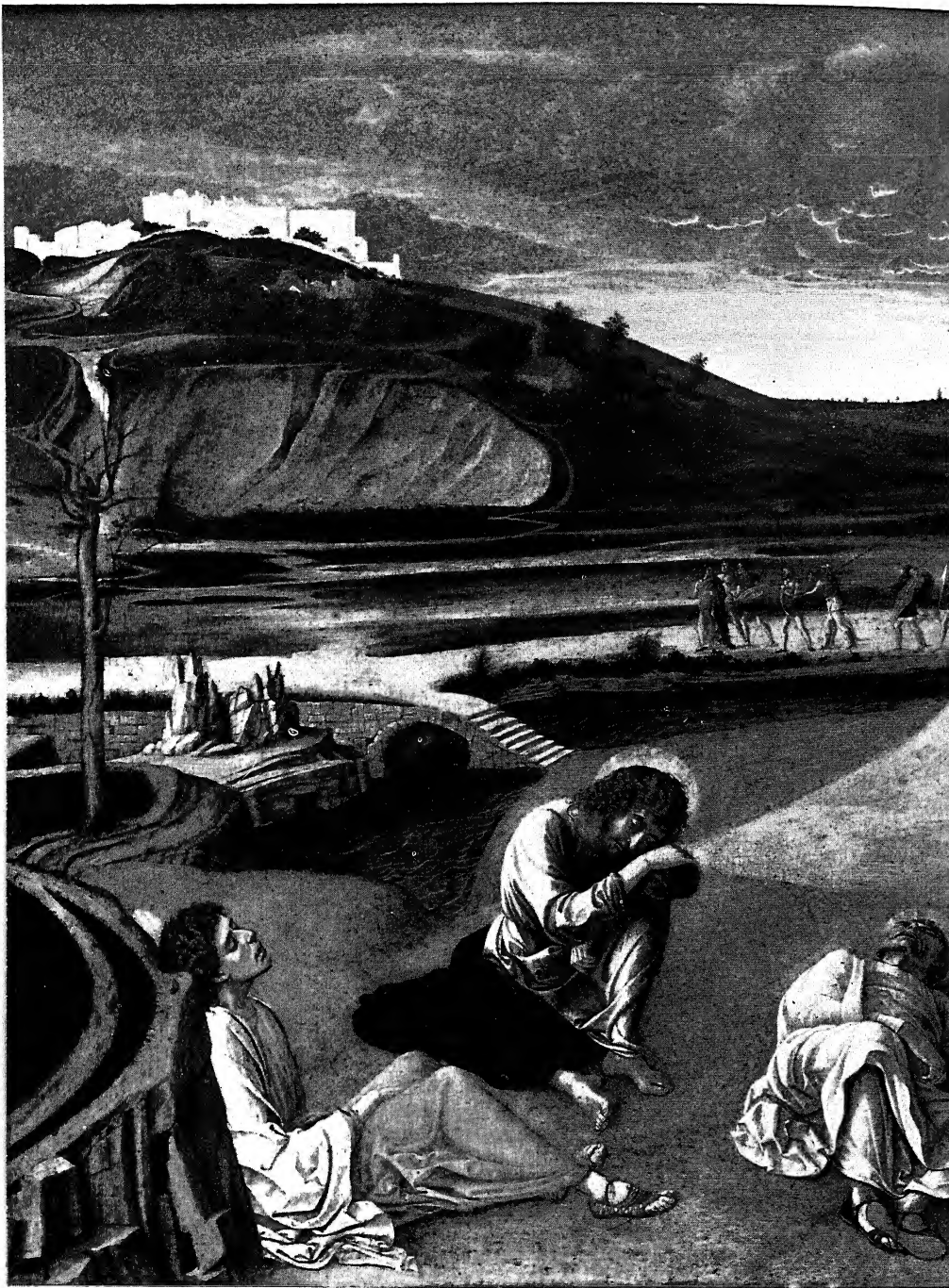
As I have explained, the book was intended primarily as the clear record of a succession of distinct creative movements, and if lengthened at all would have included more of the same poets rather than something of many others. For by the definition of poetry here indicated most of the latter are to be regarded as followers, using the current poetical idiom in verse which shines as much by reflected light as by its own interior fire. I have been concerned here only with the creators. That writers of what is in the strict sense unoriginal verse do often achieve a measure of beauty I would not deny. But my concern here has been to demonstrate the several phases of our incomparable English poetry in their purity and integrity.

IV

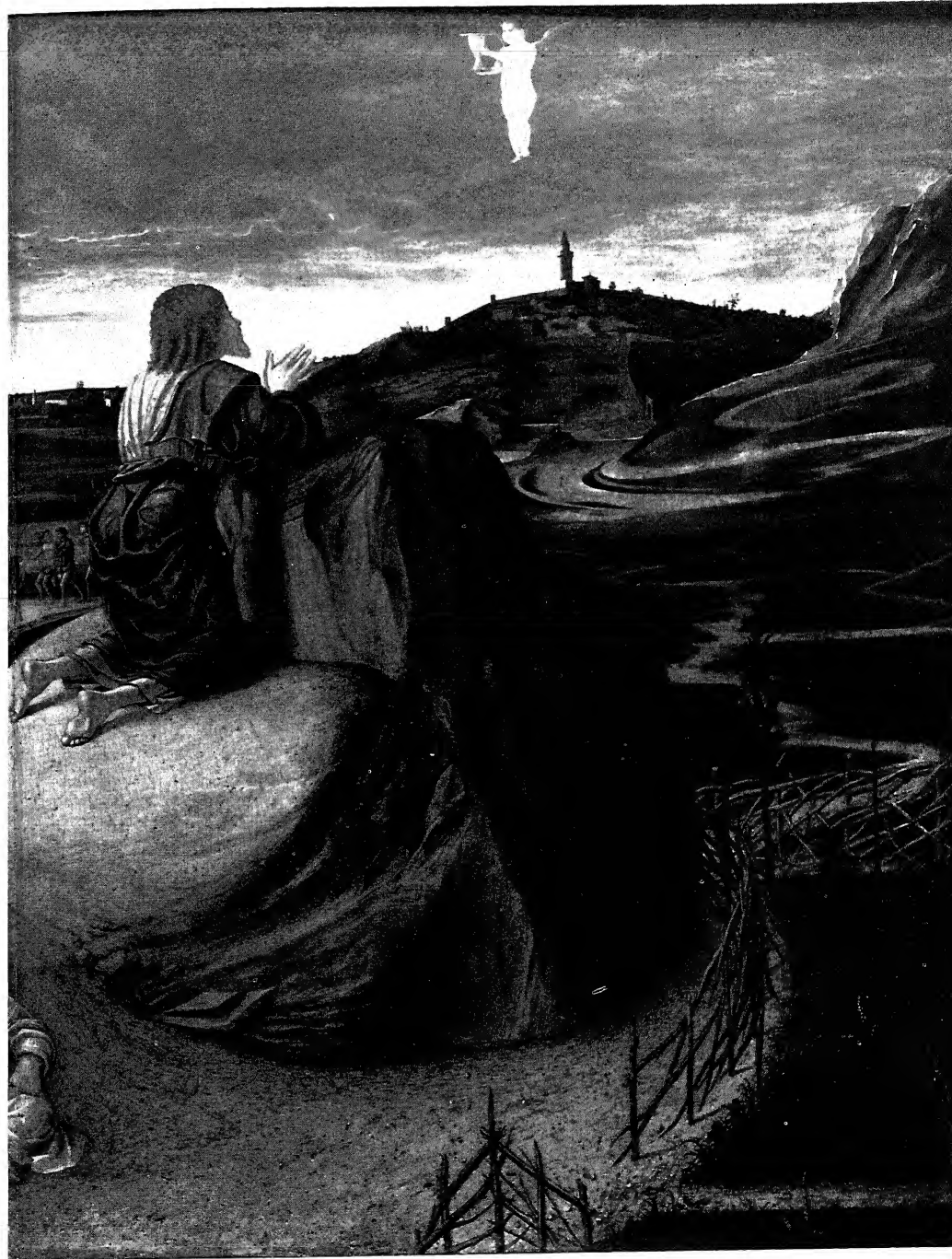
THE ARTS IN THE MODERN WORLD: FOUR BROADCAST TALKS

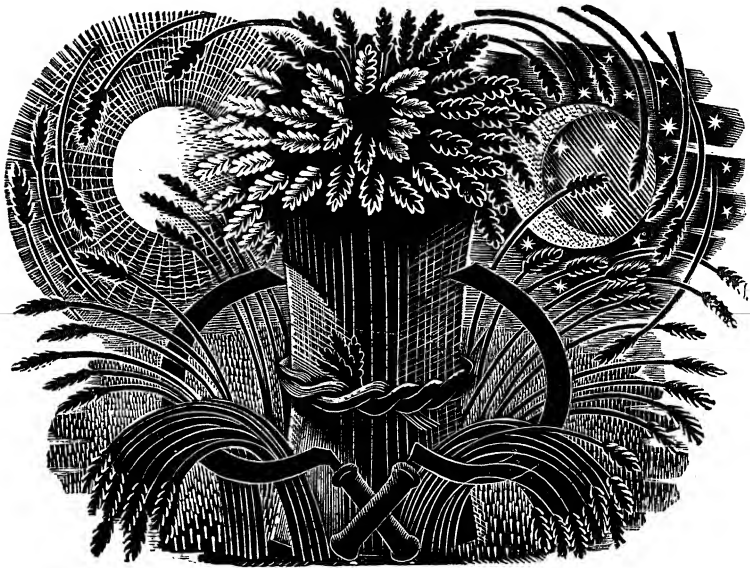


Etching by Pablo Picasso: The Three Graces. Page 104

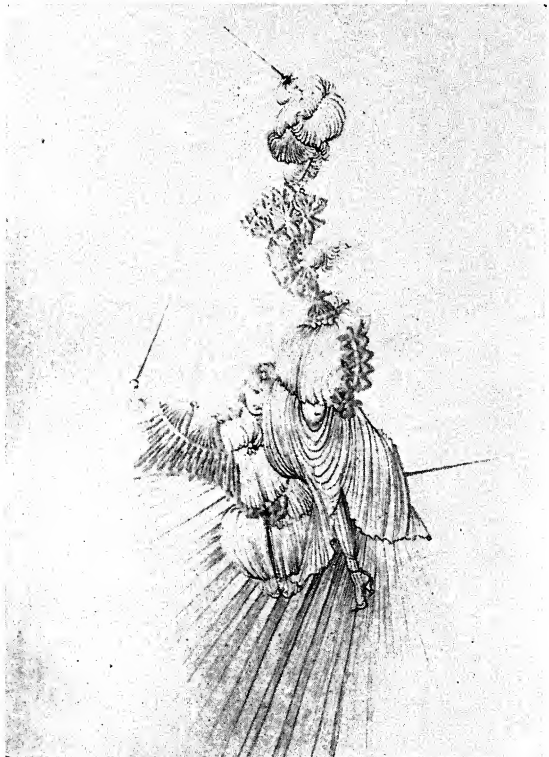


Painting by Giovanni Bellini: The Agony in the Garden





*Above,
wood-engraving
by Eric Ravillious
for the 'Cornhill
Magazine'.
Page 104*



*Book-illustration
(drawing) by
Hans Bellmer.
Pages 18, 104,
119*

I. THE ARTIST AND HIS SUBJECTS

It is usual nowadays, among those who are planning a new social order on scientific lines, to take some notice of the arts. A place is to be found for them, but only if they can prove themselves to have a social function. They are not allowed to be of value in themselves. 'Art for art's sake' is rejected as mysticism or mere decoration.

Now is this a fair view of the nature and function of the arts? I think it isn't, and I think it is important to affirm an alternative view.

But before we can come to a decision we should be clear in our minds what are the distinguishing characteristics of a work of art, and that is not at all easy. We must first of all try to distinguish between works of art in themselves, in their essence, on the one hand, and their occasions—the subjects or purposes which brought them into existence, on the other.

A first difficulty is that so many different sorts of object and composition may claim to be works of art. Not only painting and sculpture and architecture, but crafts such as pottery and weaving, as well as music and poetry, can claim the status. And with this variety in mind, many people are content to regard the art of the matter as no more than an element of style in the making and doing. The poet expresses himself (as they say), conveys his message or observation, or records his experience, with eloquence and precision. The architect designs a dwelling house to suit a client's requirements and does so with due regard to proportion and grace, while the painter and sculptor in this view simply copy or interpret a subject with skill and understanding, and so on.

Now this is true enough as far as it goes. At least it concedes

The Arts in the Modern World

that the artist contributes something. But the stress is still on the content of the work, on its rational meaning and purpose.

But this view cannot hold for music, which may have no articulate meaning at all, and for poetry it fails to account for the deep satisfaction we may still get from the strictly poetic qualities of a work whose subject is no longer of interest to us.

In this connection it is relevant, I think, to notice the case of translation. A passage of writing recording mere facts may be perfectly rendered from one language into another; but if the writing partakes of the nature of poetry, in however small a degree, then it becomes to that extent untranslatable. The poetry was conceived in one language; it was created in that language, hewn out of it, so to speak, and apart from it ceases to be poetry. Of course, if the translator is himself a poet, then the result may be poetry, but it will be the translator's poem, something essentially different from the other though its mere meaning may be the same. And this leads us to two very important observations. The first we owe to Walter Pater, who said that all art strives towards the condition of music, in which form and content are the same. You cannot possibly regard a piece of absolute music as a non-musical subject translated into sound. The second observation is that all art may be regarded as creation in a medium, in a material, from which it is inseparable. This is of great importance, as I hope to show.

Of course, every work of art must have an occasion, a starting point, which is liable to be confused with the essential creative element in the finished work. Thus a poet may have a great argument or a great passion to express, but his poem will not be great unless he also possesses a great gift of verbal enchantment, enabling him to create out of ordinary words 'jewels five words long'. Again, a potter may set out to make a jug to be efficient in use, but the creative element in his work will lie in a beauty of shape and profile which he

The Artist and His Subjects

incidentally and perhaps half-unconsciously produces. The painter may set out to record a scene that has excited him; his starting point is visual experience. But the picture he produces is valuable as a personal composition created in paint on canvas. The sculptor may be moved by something he has felt to carve stone or make a model in clay, but his work if truly creative must show the special character of his material, and not be a mere attempt to copy, in one or any medium, something existing in another. For a work of art is not a copy of something else said to be beautiful, but a thing beautiful in itself, in its own right. Only when the artist's purpose is misconceived as copying can there be any meaning in the familiar charge of 'distortion'.

It is indeed a common view that the task of the artist is to record, as a kind of specially endowed photographer, some aspect of nature, rendering its 'inner reality' as it is called, with a fidelity and penetration of which the camera is not capable. But this is still the recording of facts, though they may be more or less obscure. They may be facts about character or psychology, as in portraits, or about eternity or the colour of a sunrise, but they are none the less facts, and the man who judges a work of art by its factual content is apt to miss its essence. To a legendary Scotsman the *Ode to a Nightingale* was a negligible work, 'an ornithological poem containing very little information'. An even clearer case was that of a broadcast recitation of Gray's *Elegy* written in the churchyard at Stoke Poges, preceded by an account of the church by the Vicar and followed by a recording of the church bells. But the exponents of this view are not always so simple-minded as that. They have a wider definition of facts. It is true that they sometimes praise imagination in the painter, meaning that he has altered or elaborated in a dream-like way the results of his visual experience to be fantastic or visionary in a human sense. But to praise the artist for this is still to be tied to the fallacy of art as the representation or

The Arts in the Modern World

illustration of something human or literary or intellectual, and not creative in a particular medium.

It has also been argued that there is such beauty in nature that the artist need do no more than faithfully copy it in all humility. But nature requires a beholder, and a beholder, moreover, with certain gifts; and it is clear that the beauty of nature is something to which the artist in all of us contributes. For the layman becomes in some degree an artist in finding or analysing the pattern in a scene; though too often what he sees is only something (as he would say) 'picturesque', meaning that it has a second-hand kind of beauty, authentically perceived by him but first made known to him in pictures. And the view that the artist merely copies and improves on nature again disregards the medium; for the objects in a painting are in one medium, those in nature are in others.

The irrelevance of subject save as an initial stimulus or starting point implies of course that no distinction should be made between a subject said to be important or serious and one that is trivial. What matters is the artist's response. His greatness as a man in character or intellect is also irrelevant, since it carries no certainty of greatness in the creative use of the medium of an art.

Many artists would I know deny much of this. They are excited about their visual experiences, about their message or doctrine or their aesthetic theories and revolutionary new techniques, and they rightly concentrate on these. Critics too must have something to write about and find the subjects of paintings to be convenient pegs. And this is perhaps as well. Art would suffer if the essential quality in it was an affair of too much conscious striving. The search for 'pure poetry' and 'abstract art' illustrates this paradox very well. They too often fail for want of a stimulating occasion or vehicle. They are like pure synthetic extracts instead of solid food.

The confusion between subject and essence is increased too

The Artist and His Subjects

by the heightened sensibility which aesthetic pleasure brings. If I might be allowed to add a meaning to Shakespeare I would say that it puts us in a 'melting mood' in which all sorts of inarticulate 'meanings' crowd upon us. But it is the abstract beauty and essence which work this miracle of illusion.

What now is this essence? I have so far made no attempt to define it. It has been described as rhythm or pattern, but it is more than that. Put more obscurely it is vitality, a created organic relationship of parts. In poetry it is not only verbal magic, the creation of a pattern of syllables, but also a fabric of contrasted moods and associations brought into significant relation. It is always incalculable and irrational, and the scientific materialist on that account denies its value, if indeed he admits its existence at all. It serves no useful purpose. It is valued for its own sake. It gives a private pleasure. It does not yield to that sort of analysis which the scientific method requires. Like every other product of a creative act its existence and nature are denied by many scientists simply for lack of an adequate theory of knowledge. To discuss this lack would take me too far from my subject at the moment, but I may say this: that there are two sources of knowledge, two sorts of intellectual activity—the one analytical, to which all growth and creation are no more than the re-arrangement of parts or particles already existing; the other intuitive, comprehending these processes by as it were living them. What I propose to do in these talks is to affirm the value of this mystical activity which the practice of the arts essentially is. Though of no immediate practical usefulness, they have an ultimate value, akin to the value of truth, which in my later talks I shall attempt to explain.

2. THE ARTIST AND HIS MATERIAL

In my last talk I attempted to show that the essential and enduring quality of a work of art lies not in what it represents or records or rationally teaches, but in some aspect of form created in terms of a material. I explained how it seems that this essential quality is best not directly sought but allowed to come incidentally in the course of some other task, which may indeed be representation or the like. It is, I contended, valuable for its own sake alone, and on that account is in danger of being denounced by scientific planners who demand that every human activity shall have a social function and not be merely decorative, or escapist, as they say.

I now want you to consider in turn the case of several arts with a view to discovering the particular sorts of imaginative invention appropriate to each and deciding what they have in common.

I ought to begin with music, since that is an art obviously without practical purpose or articulate meaning. Only by what is felt to be a degrading does music become the expression of merely human sentiments. Songs and operas and programme music are often felt to be of a lower order than absolute music, actually because of their human interest and articulate meaning. The value of music is a mystical one. It is clearly non-rational alike in its origin and in its appeal. Its social function, if any, has nothing to do with knowledge as understood by the scientist, and as such it should logically be condemned by the scientific planner. But that it is usually in fact not so condemned by him is an admission of great importance, to which I shall return in a moment.

Of the other arts, architecture has most obviously the dual existence of which I spoke. It is on the one hand the solution of practical problems, and on the other the organization of

The Artist and His Material

lines and volumes and proportions into a rhythmical pattern of so abstract a character that the art has been called 'frozen music'. That 'music' is composed in a particular material, and if honestly constructed in it could not without loss be translated into any other medium. A bridge in ferro-concrete by Robert Maillart or a railway station of brick by Sir Charles Holden, no less than a Gothic cathedral in stone, was each designed for its particular medium. Each was designed for a practical purpose and is also an abstract composition. It is sometimes contended by the functionalists that these two senses of the word design are really one, that good design towards a practical end will necessarily result in a work of art; but this assumes that there is only one solution to every practical problem. But the essence of good architectural design lies in a delightful play of parts, in an adventurous use of mass and proportion, in a word, in the organisation of space. This is the essential art of architecture.

Poetry also has a dual existence. With words, ideas and images as his material the poet on the one hand conveys a meaning to the intellect, but on the other creates a rhythmical pattern which appeals like music to another, non-rational, part of the mind. The nature of that appeal has been much discussed, and the name music has indeed been often applied to it. But this is often inadequate and misleading. Poetry is not the mere metrical use of words, in a jingling, decorative way. The metrical beat plays a part, like a trellis by contrast with which the living lines of a plant are displayed and made known. But the music of great verse is a more subtle thing. Images and their reverberations in the mind are used, as well as syllables, as a painter uses tones, not in a logical sequence, but in the pattern of an incantation. This is the music of poetry, and its value is again a mystical one.

Painting and sculpture have so often been apparently concerned with representation only that the incidental but essential creative element is commonly overlooked. Yet to be

The Arts in the Modern World

of value as a work of art a painting must be itself a beautifully made thing, a composition that is adventurous, imaginative in terms of paint and canvas, lines and tones and colour. All must have a life, a vitality of their own, created and organized and given meaning by a bounding line or frame. Drawing is often spoken of as good or bad according to its truth to anatomy or some other aspect of nature. But good drawing is a vital, creative, personal calligraphy, in which lines have a life of their own, quite apart from their representational purpose, if any. Bad drawing is slick, empty, facile or lifeless drawing, however accurate and lifelike photographically. In this creative part of the painter's work, in this significant life and pattern, lies what I would again call the music of the art.

Drawing in other media should in each case speak what has been called 'the language of the tool'. Each should reveal its own order of beauty, whether in the sensitively graduated lines of a wood-engraving or in the unsentimental unvarying line produced by the etching-needle or the stylographic pen used for his drawings by the sculptor Gaudier.

Sculpture is essentially concerned with the organization of a pattern of volumes in terms of clay or stone. The quick plasticity of the one and the slow hard resistance of the other should bring entirely different sorts of form. Yet often enough the sculptor's conception is mistakenly thought of as something to be carried out, regardless of their special character, in any one of a variety of materials. Much praise is sometimes given to the sculptor's rendering of 'expression', especially in portraits, and the serene smile of a Chinese Buddhist figure is thought of as a great sculptural achievement. But the emotion (if any) aroused by such expression, like the expression on the face of a Gothic Christian statue or the Mona Lisa, is not an aesthetic emotion at all. The true response to sculpture is to a three-dimensional pattern. It has a recondite appeal, which as far as serenity or its sculptural

The Artist and His Material

equivalent is concerned is as well conveyed by a headless figure.

Pottery and other branches of industrial art are clear examples of a primary practical purpose being the occasion of creative art. The invention of shapes is conditioned by purpose and function; but it is not determined by them. What are called good shapes are vital shapes, with that element of strangeness, of unexpected but satisfying proportions which is the mark of authentically creative work. Not every potter has the gift. Some can produce nothing better than obvious shapes, smoothly and feebly echoing a worn Classical idiom. The appeal of the creative element is here once more comparable with the appeal of music. The profile of a pot may enchant us like a beautiful and intricate melody.

But in every case the miracle is worked by some element of form, of which the artist himself is perhaps only half aware. He will of course, be conscious of a practical purpose, if he has any, and of his technique in handling his tools and materials; he may also have theories about composition or colour, and so on. But these are not themselves the creative element. This unawareness does not matter, since art is not the result of a conscious reasoning faculty. It has been well said that it may be dangerous for a painter to know too much about his own creative processes, 'just as a lover is apt to lose rather than gain by too close a knowledge of his psychological reactions'; and this applies to the abstract element in all works of art, though it is that quality in them which gives them value.

I have stressed what I have called the musical element in works of visual art, not only because it is a true analogy and description, but because the comparison implies so much. The irrational, mystical and useless art of music is accepted as of value by the severest of our modern censors. Socially useful occasions may be found for most of the visual arts, though these are not their essence; but music stands by itself.

The Arts in the Modern World

For music they cannot, they do need to argue, as I have known them do for other arts, that its orderliness is a pattern of a desirable social order, or to regard imagination and fantasy, as in the case of Leonardo da Vinci and the Surrealists, as a sort of reportage of the unconscious and so of scientific value. It may be all that, but it is not necessarily art at all on that account. Its rank as a work of art depends entirely on the gift of the artist, upon his ability to create, consciously or unconsciously, a poetry of form, a music of related parts appropriate to his material.

3. THE ARTIST AND SOCIETY

In my previous talks I explained how a work of art, whether a pot or a poem or a painting, may be regarded in two aspects. It is on the one hand something with a rational occasion or purpose, and on the other something which makes a useless but satisfying, even an enchanting pattern, like music, which is its essential element. I pointed out that the artist is in danger of being denounced by the scientific planner for lack of social usefulness. I want now to examine this and kindred dangers, and explain how in my opinion society should regard the artist.

It must be admitted at once that the work of the artist *qua* artist lies outside the productive industry which it is the concern of the State, and especially the socialist State, to organize. The ultimate value of his work must be assessed by standards not normally applied to that of other men. If materialist standards are to be applied the artist is likely to remain an outcast. But since many branches of art have a practical purpose it is open to the state to patronize and support the artist on account of these activities, and in this way to solve the economic problem of a member of society whose true vocation is in the strict material sense unproductive.

The Artist and Society

Society may provide occasions for the incidental exercise of the artist's creative gifts. Public celebrations call for music; public announcements require posters and typography. Public buildings may be decorated, events and scenes need description and record, and all these may be the occasion of authentically creative works of art. In Russia and the United States artists have been organized for the performance of these public services and their livelihood and welfare have been assured them in return.

But the welfare of artists is far less important than their freedom, and their actual creative achievement must almost inevitably lie outside the competence of the ordinary State official to judge, with his practical and material standards of achievement. The great success of recent English State patronage of the arts, in such undertakings as the War Artists' work and the series Recording Britain, has been due to the flexible control exercised over the commissions. Instead of a Government official laying down the law, a committee of connoisseurs was happily employed. This committee chose the artists and approved their subjects, but left them free to decide what treatment they preferred. In the result the War Pictures are not only a valuable record of Britain's part in the War, but a cross-section of English art of to-day not excluding the most adventurous. Without such sensitive and flexible direction, State patronage might end in the rule of a stifling conservatism, or worse still, in the application of an irrelevant test of political or other orthodoxy.

Where architecture and the industrial arts are concerned the case is rather different. The word design has two meanings which are liable to be confused. Design in one sense is functional, and may be subjected to practical tests for economy and efficiency. In the other sense it is creative and must remain free from doctrinaire official control, either of academic authority with eyes on the past, or worse still of a modernist orthodoxy.

The Arts in the Modern World

Dictation and control by authority are fatal to free creation in the arts, whether they come from Church or State or ignorant public opinion democratically expressed. A scientific tyranny would be worst of all, since its findings and authority would be accepted unquestioned by a generation looking to science for salvation, and accepting its claim to take all life and thought for its province. It is at first sight a very plausible way of regarding the matter to insist that painting and sculpture are simply representational crafts like a superior and more penetrating kind of photography. Imagination of a kind would be admitted, but it would be regarded as a faculty reporting its discoveries in the realm of the unconscious. In this matter-of-fact scientific view, pictorial art is always concerned with something said to be 'represented', not with the creation of the work itself. The thrilling pattern of an authentically creative painting is treated as negligible and entirely subordinate to subject, meaning and doctrine. To insist on the element of form for its own sake is held to be a case of degrading to a meaningless pattern-making an activity that should have been of urgent human importance.

The dangers of a scientific tyranny and censorship taking this view of art are of course all the greater in a social order planned on totalitarian lines to secure the highest efficiency in productive service of all its members. There all those claims and activities that cannot be verified scientifically are in danger of being dismissed as escapist delusions. But the danger is equally great in a thoroughgoing democracy.

We must not shirk here the disagreeable fact that the pattern which I have described as the essence of a work of art is something understood and appreciated by a small minority of people only. Even with improved education it seems to me doubtful whether their number could be greatly increased. To sympathize with the creative work of the artist as I have defined it, calls for a willing abandonment of common-sense, which men of what is called character seem generally

The Artist and Society

for some reason unable to make. Only by a willingness to forget associations and disregard all human reactions and meaning for the intellect is it possible to consider even a natural scene or object as pure form. This gift of appreciation is apt to be decried by those not having it as a pretended class-distinction, claimed by those fortunate enough to enjoy leisure and the possession of works of art. At best it is dismissed as 'something the plain man cannot understand'. But though a certain amount of leisure is needed for any sort of disinterested contemplation it cannot be said that appreciation of art is a prerogative of the wealthy. It may even now be found in all grades of society.

The disastrous results of a dictatorship in this matter, by the common man with his commonsense and his blindness, were fully made known to us in Hitler's Germany. There all vision beyond what the common man can see in nature was condemned as unhealthy and degenerate. The obvious second-hand picturesque, illustrated anecdotes, and a sexually attractive prettiness, all were faithfully portrayed as the common man sees them, and these alone were admitted as entirely sane.

But as long as those dangers are avoided and the artist's freedom is secured, there is much that the State could do. For the creative artist's activity is to be cherished as one of the growing points of the plant of the human mind. As the instrument of the national consciousness the State would have a two-fold responsibility, towards the artist and towards all those who can understand him. On the one hand it would be concerned to keep alive the knowledge of past achievement as an inspiration to him; and on the other to do everything possible to support and encourage and make known to the community the work of contemporary creative artists in every medium. National and municipal theatres would be like libraries at which plays of all periods, and especially modern plays, would be performed, not as propaganda or

The Arts in the Modern World

instruction or worse still as 'classics', but as living works of art, of value for their own sake. Museums of art and picture galleries would hold collections not of specimens of historical or archaeological interest merely, but of works of art as such.

They would be treated as the embodiment of man's inexhaustible creative vision. Side by side with works of the past would be contemporary work. This would be the most important of all, and no difficulty or uncertainty of assessment should stand in the way of this form of State patronage of the arts.

In this way, then, the ground would be prepared for the future growth and encouragement of the arts, whose justification as the flower of enlightened and civilized human life I shall attempt in my final talk.

4. THE ARTIST AS VISIONARY

I have now talked to you on three occasions about works of art and their nature and significance, how I regard them as important for their own sake as creative work in form and colour, quite apart from any meaning they may have for the intellect. It now remains for me to say why I think they should be cherished by society, as the fine flower of civilized human life, why society should tolerate the unproductive useless artist as well as the practical designer, who are sometimes one and the same person.

Briefly, my case is that the artist as mystic and visionary affirms the non-rational value of beauty, just as the saint affirms the value of goodness and self-sacrifice.

I am very conscious now of the impossibility of conveying my meaning to anyone who has not known what it is to experience a work of art, who has never been moved by the disinterested contemplation of beauty. It is a liberating ex-

The Artist as Visionary

perience to be set free from personal concerns and interests and all intellectual and analytical preoccupations, and to regard things simply as shapes and colours. It is to be released from the prison of self and yet to achieve a sort of self-realization. It is akin to the experience of the lover, who finds all things transfigured, and the forms and lighting and colour and even the mere texture of objects about him become new and wonderful.

We may ask ourselves what it is that happens in such a case. Do we not then share the visionary power of the artist? Seeing and creating form, making from things seen a sublime and moving pattern? But is not all form a mystery? One is reminded of the mystic, who denies the reality of the visible world, which depends on the beholder's senses absolutely.

I have throughout these talks insisted on the creative independence and self-sufficiency of the artist's work. His vision of the world is his own creation, his handwriting is over it all, without him it would be nothing, a mere transcript, lifeless and insignificant. Is not then the artist's vision a mystical vision, and his work the creation of another world as authentic as the one the camera records? All form is a mystery. Why has anything the shape it has? Function and use account for something, but the rest is arbitrary and wonderful, though we habitually take it all for granted. All we can say about it is that certain shapes have a rhythm, a pattern, a life of their own, and we call them beautiful. It is the same with music and with poetry; the chaos and dullness of ordinary speech are transformed into a moving pattern of verbal rhythms and imagery.

Music too is obviously pattern, but without reference to the actual world of appearance. The painter, on the other hand, takes as his starting point something seen, and it is a claim often made for him that his vision penetrates to an inner reality behind appearance, and so reaches an order of

The Arts in the Modern World

truth not available to ordinary sight. If I do not accept that view, it is not because I am unaware of the profound satisfaction and sense of reality given by such works of art. It is truly as if one had drawn upon an untapped source of knowledge and truth, as if one had reached a state of timeless being beyond the transitory world. But to describe the artist's work as the truth behind appearance implies for me a fallacy. Behind appearance lies a reality no doubt, but it is a reality not dependent upon human senses, or coloured or interpreted by them. It is a reality inexpressible in terms of our sense-experience. For me, the miracle of an artist's world, more real-seeming than appearance, admits of another explanation. The mood of heightened sensibility engendered by beauty is one in which, as with some absolute music, all emotion is intensified, so that objects become as it were symbols, all sorts of inarticulate 'meanings' crowd upon us and the subject of a painting becomes a hundred times more moving. The great Venetian Giovanni Bellini once painted a picture of Christ's Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane, now in the National Gallery here in London. The figures are small, almost insignificant, but they are set in a landscape of such beauty, with a fantastic pattern of rocks, a walled town, and a dark winding road, that the human emotion and associations of the picture's subject seem to be unbearably intensified.

In the painting of the Far East an illuminating factor of this kind arises from its dependence on calligraphy. The qualities of fine brushwriting are such that the strokes forming a written character are felt to be so expressive as to induce a state of heightened sensibility. The brush-strokes are felt to be expressive, we say, but what it is that is expressed is seldom considered. It is in fact as hard to describe in terms of rational meaning or even emotion, as to say what music 'means'. But through the mere beauty of the writing the mood of a poem is expressed more strongly. So too with a Chinese painting, the brushwork may be so beautiful as to

The Artist as Visionary

suggest an infinity of meanings. Some of you may remember the famous First Principle of the fifth-century Chinese critic Hsieh Ho, seeming to require a painting to possess the very rhythm of life itself. But this is poetical exaggeration; in every case it is through the formal beauty of the brush-strokes and their placing that this miracle of illusion is performed.

On these grounds, then, we may question the claim made for the artist that he reveals the inner reality of the visible world. It may *feel* like a world more real than the visible world, because our aesthetic sensibility is heightened, and we seem to live more intensely. I should prefer to say that the artist's vision is *creative*, that his world is not a copy of another world, even a world of Platonic Ideas, but a world of his own creation. It is not a copy of anything.

I find a strange reluctance in people to admit this independence. They have a craving for what they call truth, for truth as something real, as they say, to be copied. They may mean not merely the facts of appearance, of course, but some more far-fetched order of truth. The work must be given respectability by being a copy of something having a 'real' existence. It is not enough for it to be movingly beautiful in itself. When these people praise what they call imagination in a painting they generally mean the illustration of dream-like objects whose appearance is fantastic in expression in a human sense. But to do this is still to be tied to the fallacy of art as the representation or illustration of something; something humanly sentimental, or poetic in a literary sense, and not visually creative in a particular medium, such as paint or clay or stone or engraving on wood.

We need to defend the *value* of the arts. We must affirm that the order of truth which music reveals is just as authentic as that revealed by the cold analysis and description of the scientist. It is more; it is living and creative while the other deals only with the already made.

How then may we aid and spread the understanding of

The Arts in the Modern World

these things? I have spoken of aid to be given to the artist, stressing the need for patronage free from official control. For the public I am doubtful of direct instruction, especially by schools and academies, which always tend to reduce the fluid living creative processes to an affair of fixed rules. Education in the appreciation of the arts must always be self-education, a long-continued process of trial and testing. One may set the mind free of misconceptions, say what kind of thing must be sought. But the discovery of beauty must be a personal discovery.

I have now said enough to make it clear that I regard the arts, in their essence, not as narcotic or escapist forms of entertainment, or as so much factual record, or as fulfilling a social function, but as the visionary creation of symbols, of awe-inspiring images wholly irrational yet as authentically real as anything belonging to the so-called real world of everyday life. What we call the beauty of those images, and the liberation it brings, are to me evidence that they proceed from some ultimate reality. All convey a knowledge of reality more immediate than any reasoning process or analysis can give; for the language used by the original artist is composed of symbols which are fire-new, not the worn counters of common speech or the smooth abstractions of reasoned argument. The artist is a creator, and his vision and sensibility rank with those of the saint and mystic among the most precious faculties of the human mind.

V

VISUAL ARTS

I. ART AND SCIENCE

The arts have for long been reckoned among the chief obstacles to the acceptance of the scientific view of things. As the product of an apparently irrational faculty, claiming to create something of value for its own sake, they cannot easily be accommodated within the single causal system which science postulates; they are not readily susceptible to the analysis and measurement and experimental verification which are the essential criteria of the scientific method. They belong to the world of values, of those qualitative judgments the reality of which science finds it hard to admit.

Scientists have consequently been inclined to tolerate the arts only on condition that they can be shown to perform some social function, such as conveying information, or recording human feeling, or teaching something about the nature of human existence. They confine their attention in this way to the intellectual content of works of art, to the subjects which are the exciting occasions (perhaps the necessary occasions) of their creation, but not their essence. But that there is such an essence is shown by the moving power of many works of art whose occasion no longer interests us, whose intellectual content seems to us in fact absurd.

For example, a poem may be written to express anger at the state of the world or simply in praise of life, but its value as poetry depends absolutely on the writer's power to create a certain kind of pattern of sound and meaning. Again, a fourteenth-century earthenware jug may have been made to hold water, to be efficient in use, and its fitness for dipping in a well may be rationally judged; but its existence as a

Visual Arts

complex of curves and volumes is something created and rationally unaccountable. A portrait by Epstein or Modigliani may be a penetrating study of character, but as a work of art it is valued as a creative arrangement of forms and colours.

Dr. Martin Johnson in a recent book¹ makes a new attempt to reconcile the irrational creativeness of art with the logical structures of science. Finding common ground in the idea of 'communication by pattern', he takes on the one hand modern physics which deals in a pattern of images remote from direct sense-experience, while on the other he contends that many works of art show a similar departure from the representation of objects of sense, and that this too gives place to pattern, this time a pattern of 'fantastic images'. Taking art away from copying and science away from direct sense-impressions Dr. Johnson hopes to reconcile them. This promising thesis is supported by several essays, on Chinese jade and the sculpture of Chartres, on the ballet 'Petrouchka' (entirely overlooking the allegory in that remarkable work), and a somewhat belated discovery of the late quartets of Beethoven. An essay on the mediaeval astronomers and mathematicians of Islam and China is included as illustrating the 'Historical Failure to maintain a Balance between the Scientific and the Imaginative', and a long study of the 'fantastic' drawings of Leonardo da Vinci shows that artist as 'the Prototype of Scientific Uneasiness in an Unscientific Community'. Unfortunately the pattern of images referred to in the author's definition proves disappointing on examination. In the first place, its identity with the pattern discovered by the physicist is little more than verbal coincidence; art is stated to be pattern in the 'qualitative domain of feeling'; science in 'the quantitative domain of measurement'. But it is never the true pattern of creative art. Here again we meet the familiar fallacy which would regard art as the rendering of

¹ *Art and Scientific Thought* (Faber and Faber).

Art and Science

some subject having a special quality of 'beauty' or 'imagination', rather than a special quality in the rendering itself.

This misunderstanding is clearly revealed in the essay on Leonardo, whose 'imaginative drawings' are described in terms of their subject-matter. We read of the 'anatomical exactitude' of his composite creatures, with the 'muscular detail mechanically perfect'; even when they show a 'radical departure from the living model' they still 'express' human emotions, such as 'the extremity of despair'. They are 'lessons in catastrophic psychology', or convey in the serene expression of the eyes 'profundity of character' or 'a vision of a world where they find nothing to shake their peace of mind and the unapproachable superiority to fate which they seem to have attained'. Now while all this may prove the greatness of Leonardo's mind it is no proof at all of his greatness as an artist: that must depend on a creative quality in the forms of the drawings themselves. It is the same with Surrealist art; a report of a dream-vision is not necessarily a work of art because it is accurate, or valuable as a psychological document; the Surrealist must have the special gift of an artist. Dr. Johnson makes much use of the words 'mysticism' and 'imagination' but the 'invisible world' to which he refers 'visionary art' appears to be peopled with creatures having the same senses and mental apparatus as our own. A profounder mysticism of the arts would find in each a world of forms, newly and arbitrarily created in terms of their several materials, all existing in their own right, so to speak. These would be recognized as no less authentic, and no more arbitrary, than the forms created by life in animal or vegetable tissue. Dr. Johnson speaks in one place of a type of art in which response is aroused 'more by manner than by matter', but this is precisely true of all works of art whatever, when considered as such. The author is also much concerned to distinguish 'legitimate fantasy' from 'mere caprice'; it must have 'honesty of patterning' he says, and will 'escape

Visual Arts

the risk of shirking the responsibilities of realism' only 'by the artist's possession of an acutely sympathetic humanity'.

Thus we come back to the scientists' inevitable criteria—the illustrational human content, the documentary value and social significance, and the conveying of information (which may be far-fetched information); but the creative quality they never can admit, lacking an adequate theory of knowledge.

2. THE PAINTER'S PURPOSE AND THE PUBLIC TASTE

Any discussion of the function of art criticism raises in an acute form the question of the public taste. Every conscientious critic must regard his readers as potentially capable of experiencing works of art of the highest order. Though he cannot give them sensibility he may clear away misunderstanding. But it would be a misguided zeal that would seek to dissuade a man from liking something that gives him pleasure; he must be persuaded to see something beyond. The popular taste is still incurably devoted to representation, not only in painting, and no doubt many people will never pass beyond it. The crowds in the National Gallery look for reminders of a fine day in the country or of a thunderstorm at sea, for pathos and illustration and literary symbolism, for nobility in the men's and charm in the women's portraits, for lifelike expression and 'character finely rendered'.

All these people forget or fail to understand that a painting is essentially a complex of forms and colours artificially assembled, a self-sufficient created thing and not a copy of something else. It is a creation in terms of a medium. It is not a copy of something said to be beautiful in another medium, such as flesh-and-blood or earth or rock or sky. Nor is it a copy or expression of sentiments found to have moral



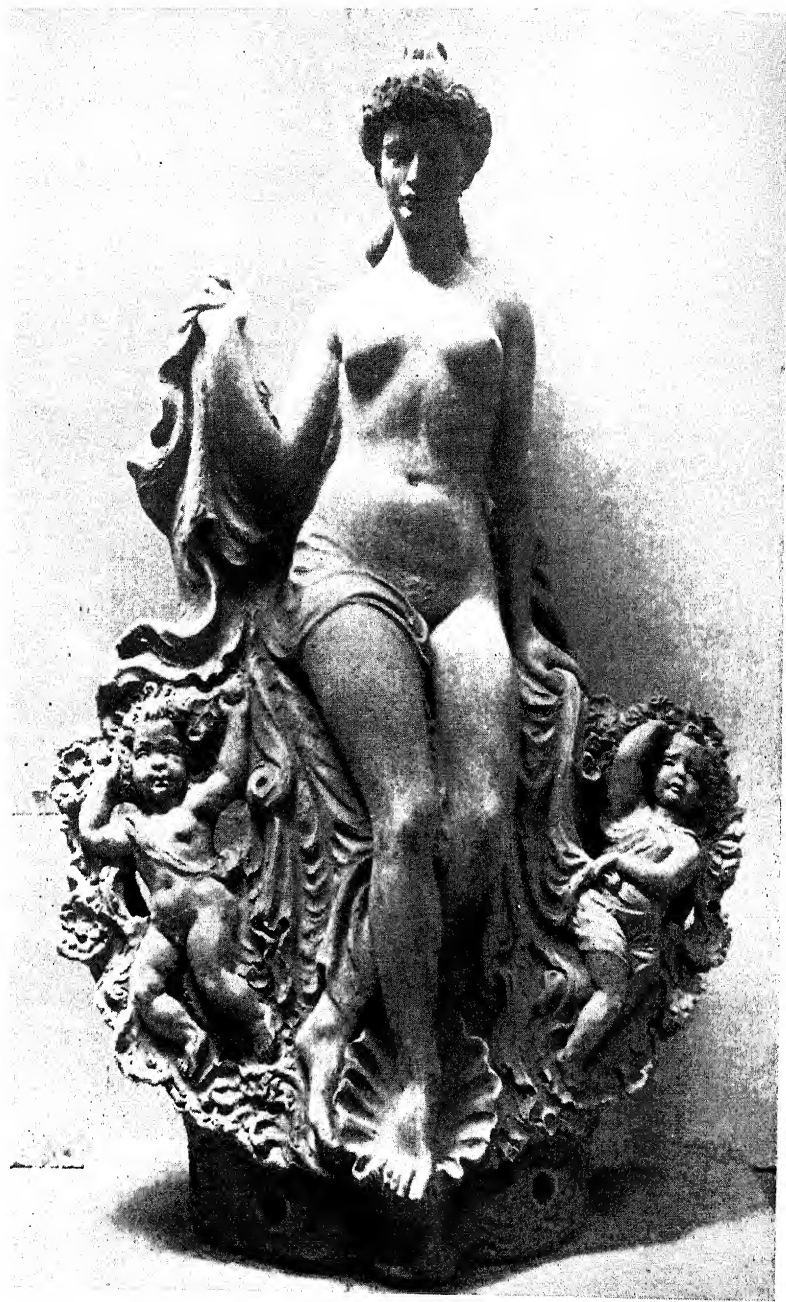
Nymphenburg porcelain group by Franz Anton Bustelli: height, $10\frac{3}{4}$ in.
Page 125



Carving in green marble by Henry Moore:



in the collection of Sir Eric Maclagan: height, 9 in. Page 123



Terracotta by Arnold Machin: height, 5 ft. Page 123

The Painter's Purpose

beauty—that is to say, having beauty in the medium of life and conduct. It is not even a copy or intuition of a Platonic Idea or Reality or directly the expression of the disquiets or other characteristics of the age. It has reality, but a reality in its own right.

This is not to say that visual experience is not valuable to a painter, though the extent and nature of his dependence on it has long been a matter of dispute. A thing seen may become the exciting occasion of a fine painting, just as a utilitarian purpose may be the occasion of the making of a beautiful pot. But the nature of the occasion, whether visual, involving a measure of representation, or magical, or utilitarian, does not determine the aesthetic value of the painting or the pot. This depends absolutely on the creative gift of the artist who made it.

This world of created form is not to be dismissed as no more than trivially decorative. Comprehended by a mind rid of a conventional acceptance of the world of sense as the only 'real' world, it is as arbitrary and authentic and wonderful as that other. But it is not to be judged as art by the yardstick of common-sense or the test of mere likeness. The faculty of appreciating it is not universal. Few people seem to have the power of abandoning themselves to the appeal of line and colour and their pattern of associations, without reference to the thing or idea 'supposed to be represented'. And few will admit their disability, or give up the standard which alone they are capable of applying.

Yet the preoccupation with subject, shown by the public and also frequently shared by the painter himself, is not altogether to the bad. Some of the most gifted modern painters have themselves expressed a doubt whether the real value of their work does not lie in qualities of which they are unconscious. It may be dangerous, one of them has written, to know too well what you are doing. Far more important for the artist is a passionate desire to paint something which

Visual Arts

has moved him deeply. Even if a man sentimentally declared that his intention was 'faithfully and lovingly to record what he saw in nature', his work would have merit if he were an authentic artist in this unconscious way; and not only representation in painting but a hundred other preoccupations can set the artist free. All are so many techniques, potential vehicles or occasions, but not the essence of artistic creation.

For this reason pronouncements by painters themselves seldom touch the whole truth of the matter. Blake's 'visions' and Samuel Palmer's sense of the immanence of God were of the utmost importance to them, but to us are of incidental interest only.

3. SCULPTURE AND MODELLING

Sculpture, or the making of beautiful objects in three dimensions, 'in the round' that is to say, has come to refer to two distinct arts, for which the names glyptic and plastic would have been simple and appropriate. That both are known as sculpture is due to the unfortunate practice of sculptors in making clay models to be copied in stone by journeymen working with mechanical devices. This practice, almost universal in the nineteenth century, was not unknown in the Renaissance period and was customary (so it is contended) in Greek sculpture of the fifth century B.C.

The two arts are obviously distinct; in one the forms are slowly revealed from within the stone, so to speak, and since the material tends to be resistant, broad stylised 'monumental' forms appropriate to stone are naturally produced. 'Direct carving' in the stone has become a gospel among the most gifted modern sculptors, who claim that it has a more enduring appeal than modelled work.

In modelling it is normal to build up forms by adding and shaping the plastic clay until the desired form is produced.

Sculpture and Modelling

Here all is quick and responsive, and the result less monumental perhaps than carved work, but in the hands of a master it is none the less capable of a profound aesthetic significance. Its facility and rapidity encourage the employment of naturalistic form and render it especially fitted to depict those forms in movement. But in this way also they may be the medium of authentically creative work.

Sculpture in metals, such as bronze or lead, may be mere castings from clay, but may also be authentic sculpture, wrought by the artist after casting into their own range of characteristic forms and surface textures.

Sculpture is also the type of all the arts of three-dimensioned form; a mediaeval earthenware jug, a silver cup of the time of Charles I and a Chinese jade-carving may all show the same mystery, little though the craftsmen, unconscious creators of now-treasured masterpieces, would have understood that assertion. But every material brings by collaboration with the artist its own order of beauty. In the wrought stone of savage weapons, the Polynesian axes, the jade knives of New Zealand and the obsidian masks of ancient Mexico, in the porphyry and diorite of Egypt and the ancient East, even in the worked flints of Neolithic man, a material is brought to life in a beauty of related planes, of subtly rounded surfaces and significant hollows, such as has been more consciously sought in our own time by a Brancusi or a Henry Moore, by the fiercely creative Henri Gaudier or in the more calculated art of Eric Gill or Richard Bedford. Here is no pointless reproduction of something called beautiful or charming in advance; the work is beautiful itself, a magical object. In the *Woman and Child* here reproduced, the magnificent polygon of arms and shoulders eloquently encloses and protects the rounded forms within it. There is no trace of sentimental prettiness. All is marble. This deliberate rejection of 'beautiful' subjects by the modern sculptor, and the disfavour with which he regards Greek work of 'the fine period',

Visual Arts

speaking of his care not to let the irrelevant sex-generated appeal stand in the way of his art. For no word is more commonly misused. Beauty, but not prettiness, grace or charm, ennoble many wonderful but ugly negro wooden figures and masks, and the host of bears and frogs, hounds and lions of classical Chinese art, superbly stylized in jade and bronze. Equally irrelevant and obstructive is the human expression of faces. The head of a rock-carved Buddha may share the serene calm expressed in the flowing lines of drapery and gesture; but a headless figure is no less eloquent in that particular language of stone. And that language has a spiritual power no less far-reaching than the verbally expressed concepts of an other-worldly religion, inspiring the rhapsodies of intellectuals. Equally mistaken are those who read 'expression' into the formulae of primitive art, into the archaic smile of early Greek sculpture or the rigid immobility of negro masks. For while art need not be tied to the imitation of natural forms the alternative is not the 'expression' of transcendental longings for another world. Either may be the avowed purpose of the artist, but the latter is as much an affair of representation as the former and as irrelevant to the true creative artistic achievement. Art is truly a spiritual activity, but it creates its own otherworld, directly through its materials. It is not the translation of ideas of spiritual beauty, but itself creates that beauty in terms of material.

4. A PORCELAIN GROUP

A porcelain group lately acquired for the Victoria and Albert Museum, besides being in itself a beautiful thing, illustrates with exceptional clearness a number of points often disputed with regard to the art of the sculptor and the nature of its appeal. For example, the importance of subject, the merits of modelling as compared with carving, the significance of the

A Porcelain Group

Rococo style, and even the nature of sculptured form itself—all these questions are raised by this fantastic group and call for an answer.

The group was made in 1759 at the Nymphenburg porcelain-factory, for the hunting-lodge of an Electress of Bavaria. It was modelled by Franz Anton Bustelli, an Italian-Swiss, who was perhaps the most gifted of all the modellers for porcelain in the eighteenth century, when the material was the subject of excited interest at every European court, and every German prince aspired to own a factory.

Porcelain had taken the place of sugar and wax as the material for the figures and groups which, by a German court custom, were used as table decorations, intended to be seen from every side. Here the modeller has taken the opportunity to create an intricate and fanciful but always clear and rhythmical complex of forms. These appear to be in continuous movement, playing against one another like waves, in a restless counterpoint, which is given added force and a sort of irony by the still, upright column and the rigid figures of the dogs. Crowning the whole as if it had burst into flower are two human figures in fantastic related movement, of a man apparently offering a woman a slice of ham. In detail, the modelling has a superb vitality. The man's back, for example, with its slight twist shows a rare beauty of plane and contour, exploiting in an original way the inexhaustible arabesque of the human figure; while the animals are rendered with a masterly appreciation of their tense springiness and strength. In fact, the lines themselves throughout are taut, though interrupted, broken and reinforced in places where a lesser artist would have made them all easily flowing. Above all, the whole composition was imagined in three dimensions, not only giving an effective silhouette from every point of view, but satisfying also, with its composition of volumes, an imagined exploration with the hands.

Visual Arts

Compositions of this sort, with their fanciful, almost abstract asymmetrical wave-and-scroll forms, of course belong to the Rococo style, which prevailed in fashionable European decorative art in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. The Rococo has been claimed as a manifestation of a 'Northern' abstract tendency in art, and it is perhaps a confirmation of this theory that the style was so eagerly adopted in the Baltic region and that some of the wildest Rococo extravagance is (or was) to be seen in Germany, above all at the palaces of Würzburg and Nymphenburg itself.

But to say that this porcelain group belongs to the Rococo is merely to classify it, not to explain it, or even to appraise it, unless the Rococo by its disregard of 'truth' is held, as some stern moralists have declared, to be a degraded style like its predecessor the Baroque. To appraise it fairly one must have a criterion by which essential sculptural qualities may be recognized, and to refer to such essential qualities is surely to rule out at once the criterion of 'truth to Nature'. Like every other creative art, sculpture is essentially the organization of forms in terms of a medium, which a pointless copy of something else can never be. The merit or significance of forms so created cannot be judged by any rational test; they are as arbitrary and wonderful as the sounds which make up a composition in music. No definition is possible more precise or logical than Sydney Smith's 'definition' of an archdeacon. We may speak of vitality and rhythm and three-dimensional design, but such words of course define nothing. Yet the value of a particular work may be recognized with surprising unanimity.

In the present case the medium was clay—clay of an exceptional kind. Now, modelling in clay is a branch of the sculptor's art which, at the moment, is apt to be disparaged in favour of direct carving in stone. But while the forms proper to stone tend to be admirably still and monumental,

A Porcelain Group

those modelled in clay may have a value that is no less authentic; they may be quick, energetic, animated, apt for the rendering of movement. Such work as Giovanni Bologna's swiftly thumb'd 'River God', at South Kensington and many other 'sketches' are as authentically form-creative, for all their naturalism, as any carving. Porcelain clay is peculiarly plastic, and, being in its final state vitrified or glassy, becomes, as it were, all nerves, wantonly fragile. Such was the essential character of porcelain as it was felt in Germany in the eighteenth century, and nowhere was it better understood than by Bustelli at Nymphenburg. The material was brought to life, but to a life of its own.

It may be objected that the result is here only a witty piece of nonsense, not to be compared with the sublime masterpieces of serious sculpture; and the question of relative merit certainly calls for an answer. But it must be asserted at once that greatness in a man, in the familiar intellectual or moral or human sense, is here irrelevant; Michelangelo was not a great sculptor because he wrote the Sonnets, just as, on the other hand, a mute Milton would not have been a Milton at all. Authentic art may spring from serious or trivial occasions; it may be inspired by excited visual experience, or may take the form of abstractions spun apparently from the artist's inner consciousness. But the greatness of the result depends in every case not on the character of the starting-point, but on the gifts of the artist *qua* artist. To call for moral and intellectual greatness in the artist, or for a 'serious' theme, is to confuse the media, to mistake the occasion for the achievement. One may perhaps ask whether one sort of form or rhythm is not 'better' than another; but the answer must ultimately depend on the richness of invention, the vision and power of expression—in a word, on the genius of the modeller as artist.

Disregard in this way of 'importance' in the subject of a work of art has often been condemned as a low view of the

Visual Arts

matter; but it is, on the contrary, a materialist view of sculpture that denies the mystical grandeur and significance of pure form, with no more articulate reference to the life of its time than a passage of music. It is true that absolute music does seem to vary in depth of appeal; that Vaughan Williams' 'Tallis' seems to touch us more profoundly than a Tchaikovsky waltz. Yet both can give the satisfaction that greets what in despair of a definition we call 'perfection'.

Thus we may look for delight in a work of art with the most trivial, ugly or meaningless subject, if the artist has the right vision, and we are ready, in all humility, to surrender to his spell.

5. TRADITION AND CHANGE IN THE ART OF THE POTTER

Like other arts, pottery reveals in its history the interaction of tradition and change—the former sustaining the craftsman, saving him from freakish and wilful eccentricity, imposing a general form-preference within which he may freely express himself; the latter springing up when an exhausted tradition has been fertilized by a foreign contact or by the emergence of a new technique.

In the history of pottery three principal stages are to be noted, the last having begun in our own time. The change from primitive hand-modelling to the use of the fully-developed wheel was bridged, it is true, by the use of the pivoted support known to archaeologists as a 'slow wheel'. Yet the change was a revolutionary one, in that it interposed a mechanical contrivance to share with the potter's hands the task of shaping the vessel, and some prehistoric purist might well have been heard to deplore the change as robbing the art of its intimate hand-made character. Here one may note especially the firm rounded surfaces, the full convex bottoms,

The Art of the Potter

which even when the shape was suggested by carved stone are characteristic of the hand-modelled pot. In the second phase (still of course not ended), the clay is given what seems to be a spontaneous centrifugal urge, and the shaping takes on the character of growth, in forms dynamically thrusting outwards or seeming to ascend. In the third phase, of casting and turning, the hand's contact with the clay is completely eliminated. This implies a change often blindly denounced and at best still imperfectly understood for lack of an unprejudiced and thorough-going machine-aesthetic. (Casting must of course be clearly distinguished from pressing in moulds, which has been employed in pottery almost from its beginning. In the casting process a liquid clay mixture is poured into porous moulds, forming vessels with great speed.)

Now tradition in an art may have two aspects. In the first place there is the technical tradition of a craft handed down from master to pupil—a national or local or workshop way of making and doing. In the second place, a tradition may be embodied in a preference for certain forms and patterns and proportions. And since all technical problems may be solved in a variety of ways it is in the expression of this form-preference that the art of the potter largely consists. It is not a case of a style deliberately adopted, but of an idiom unconsciously spoken. Tradition in this sense may have an extraordinary vitality; for two thousand years the tyranny of the Classical forms gave them a sort of artistic respectability, inducing the belief that they alone could ever be 'perfect'. Only in comparatively recent times has it been brought home to us that the 'disproportion' of the Far Eastern shapes may be just as satisfying. Even now the hand-modelled forms of primitive African wares are often regarded as 'queer' and 'ugly'.

A tradition growing sterile and exhausted may be fertilized by contact with foreign work or stimulated by the invention

Visual Arts

or adoption of new processes or materials. The history of pottery shows in a striking way the recurrent fructifying influence of Chinese porcelain, repeatedly brought to bear on the pottery of other countries. As early as the ninth century Chinese white porcelain became a model for the potters of Samarra in Mesopotamia, and for centuries remained an inspiration throughout Persia and the near East. By the seventeenth century the influence reached Europe, and the universal fashion for blue-and-white was of the same origin.

In English pottery of the last two centuries the impact of at least two such fertilizing influences may be noted. The rise of the Staffordshire potteries in the first half of the eighteenth century was largely due to emulation of the imported Chinese porcelain, then first arriving in England in large quantities. A new standard of refinement was set, and thinner, harder, and more durable wares began to be made. The improvement was continued in the second half of the century by Josiah Wedgwood, whose perfected cream-coloured ware was further inspired as to shapes by a new ideal drawn from the Revived Classical movement of his time. A new elegance and restraint as well as a rational simplicity and fitness for use were imposed on forms which were none the less typically English.

In our own time a comparable influence from abroad has profoundly affected the forms of English pottery. The early wares of China, revealed to us only in the present century, with their austere beauty of glaze-colour and texture, simple forms, and sparing decoration, have made a deep impression on potters and their patrons alike, but particularly on the studio-potters, whose devotion to the wares of the Far East has had the same overmastering power as a belief in the absolute superiority of the Greek and 'Etruscan' wares had over Wedgwood and the potters of the late-eighteenth century. The versions of early Chinese wares made by our studio

The Art of the Potter

pottery are exactly parallel with Wedgwood's decorated stoneware; and both stand apart from the direct line of ceramic evolution. But the movement towards simplicity so inspired has been further strengthened in our time by a new awareness of the importance of fitness for use; design has indeed been doubtfully defined as no more than this. In factory-technique too, a greatly increased reliance on casting and turning, and mechanical moulding with the jigger, rather than free-hand throwing, has brought the precision characteristic of mechanized manufacture, the third phase mentioned above. This change has in fact amounted to a revolution, since the craftsman designing his own work has been replaced by the external designer whose model or drawing is mechanically reproduced. It was a revolution already implied in the reforms of the first Josiah Wedgwood. It has sometimes been argued that the 'mechanically perfect' object produced by the machine, with no 'organic' freehand irregularity, cannot be a work of art at all. But this argument is contradicted by the example of architecture, in which the object is exactly reproduced from the design of one taking no physical part in its making. An architectural order of design of calculated proportions and a beautiful if cold precision is characteristic of such machine work. But even here a traditional English type of form may appear, distilled as it were to an essence; handles (for example) which in a craftsman's work would have the freedom and 'spring' of a living gesture, have here a delicate and thrilling geometry. Such pottery may be fittingly mass-produced, with the advantage that it may become widely available to all classes of the community.

The decoration of such modern factory-made wares clearly cannot maintain the freehand modes of the past. Artists with the capacity and training implied in the best work of the eighteenth century and earlier, in the modern world would require remuneration far in excess of what could be paid by a manufacturer not merely concerned to supply a

Visual Arts

luxury market. The economic status of the artist has changed, and as a consequence nothing but the simplest brushwork is within the capacity of the 'paintresses' in even the best of our modern factories. The vital, sensitive drawing, the often masterly composition, the just placing and fitting to a shape, seen in the older work, are all quite out of reach of the factory hand of to-day. Some form of mechanical reproduction is called for, and is already available in the transferred print. Unfortunately it has been customary for the potters to use this resource merely to simulate miniature-painting in full polychrome, with an odious falsity and tawdriness. But printing in its own right, as used in the eighteenth century, has lately been revived with complete success by Wedgwood's in ingenious and delightful work by Victor Skellern and Eric Ravilious. Nothing could be more appropriate on modern pottery which has been mechanically produced. Printing and engraving are arts that are very much alive to-day and both are processes of mechanical multiplication, as Sir Francis Meynell has pointed out.

Both the shaping and the decoration of the modern factory-made pot may thus make it a 'standardized' product, and most people profess to feel horror at the thought of 'standardization'. But the charge could as well be brought against any class of objects that are multiplied by mechanical means—such as printed fabrics, and bottles for cosmetics and other purposes, as well as printed books; all are made as closely alike and as 'mechanically perfect' as the machine will allow, and all may have as great a beauty, in an impersonal architectural way, as their designers can give them. That this beauty is of a different order from that proper to handicraft must of course be admitted, but it is none the less authentic.

But though handicraft is thus largely superseded in the machine age (with its potential social and economic advantages) it still exists, and it is of great importance that it should be kept vigorously alive. Being the work of individual potters

The Art of the Potter

it cannot compete economically with the factory productions' whose clean precision it cannot and should not attempt to rival. For table use the factory-made article may also be more convenient and hygienic, and to most people more pleasant to use, than the most beautifully shaped and subtly glazed vessel of rugged stoneware in the early Chinese manner, however admirable that may be in itself. The modern Western tea-table calls for a standard different from that appropriate to the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Yet a higher sensibility is required by the latter, and this has an obvious cultural value. Only the finest hand-made and hand-decorated pottery can satisfy it, and only by familiarity with the masterpieces, old and new, can the faculty be trained.

I would mention here such aspects of form as (for example) the profile of a certain type of T'ang cup and above all the subtle variations of thickness in its walls, perceptible only to the touch; the nervous flick of the Persian potter's brush, the almost inhuman perfection of the Turkish ('Rhodian') decoration, and the sensitiveness of the best porcelain painting, all may be of the utmost value in the formation of a cultivated and catholic taste. Such a discriminating and unprejudiced taste is essential if well-designed manufactured goods are to find purchasers. The production of individual hand-made pieces for a luxury market has even been regarded by some factories (such as Copenhagen) as an activity complementary to the production of useful wares. For hand-made pottery may be regarded, like sculpture and painting, as a branch of fine art, important for its own sake and for the part it may play in the training of eye and hand to appreciate the aesthetic values of form, texture and decoration in pottery, and in much else besides.

6. THE ART OF THE GLASSMAKER : A SURVEY

Glass is now so familiar to all of us that we are apt to forget what a remarkable substance it is. It is wonderful as the product of the action of fire on such unlikely materials as sand and ashes, And when it is made into vessels there is something incalculable about it, in the play of light on its surface and apparently imprisoned within it.

But the making of glass is also an art. The shaping of vessels in glass, for use and delight, has been for more than three thousand years the embodiment of constantly changing styles. Ancient Egypt, the Roman Empire, Baghdad and the courts of early Islam, Venice, England, Germany, and modern France, all have given the world supremely lovely work in glass. We all have glass in our homes—drinking-glasses certainly, a flower-vase or two perhaps, and some ovenware and perfume bottles, and each of these could without doubt be linked with some stage or other of this long procession of styles. I cannot describe all those styles here, but I want to give some idea of the sort of pleasure that is to be had from handling and looking at glassware, old and new, and to explain how the evolution of its technique has reached a critical stage at the present time.

The working of glass is in some ways the most beautiful of all the handicrafts. To manipulate the material while it is hot and plastic calls for quick, rhythmical movements, almost like dancing. The resulting shapes have a comparable rhythmical gesture, making it the very pattern of creative art. But the craft is now threatened with extinction, it is said. In its place we are to have a mechanized industry with automatic machines that can already turn out 15,000 glass bottles each in a day. That sort of thing sets us some problems, social and economic as well as aesthetic. As in the case of other

The Art of the Glassmaker

industrial arts invaded by the machine, we have to weigh our losses and set them against our undoubted gains. The case of glass is typical. To save labour in making useful things must be gain, in a distracted and impoverished world. That is a gift we cannot reject. But shouldn't we preserve the handicraft?

I should perhaps first remind you of what glass is and how it is made. As you probably know, it is essentially silica in the form of quartz, flint, or sand, melted with the aid of an alkaline flux; this may be either potash or soda, formerly prepared from wood or plant ashes. When hot, glass is more or less sluggishly fluid, sticky and plastic and very ductile. That is to say, it may be pulled out like toffee into very long threads or sheets without breaking. It may be coloured with various metallic oxides. Most sands contain a trace of iron, and on this account common glass tends to be greenish. This might be called the natural colour of glass, and it is often very attractive. But fashion has usually inspired a wish to make glass that is colourless like crystal—rock crystal that is to say, a semi-precious stone. Such glass may have a very high refractive index, approaching the brilliancy of the diamond. This is especially the case with a kind of glass containing much lead, first made in England in the seventeenth century—the so-called lead-crystal glass.

Glass has been made into vessels in three principal ways. The first or primitive way was developed in ancient Egypt from the bead-making in the course of which it seems glass was first made. A lump of sandy clay was covered by winding closely round it a thread of hot and sticky glass; when this was cold the clay core was scraped out. Only small vessels could be made in this way, and the method soon died out with the invention of blowing, as it is called, which is the second way of making glass vessels. This was invented about the beginning of the Christian era and quickly became known over the whole Roman Empire. A lump of molten glass is taken up on the end of an iron tube and blown into a bubble

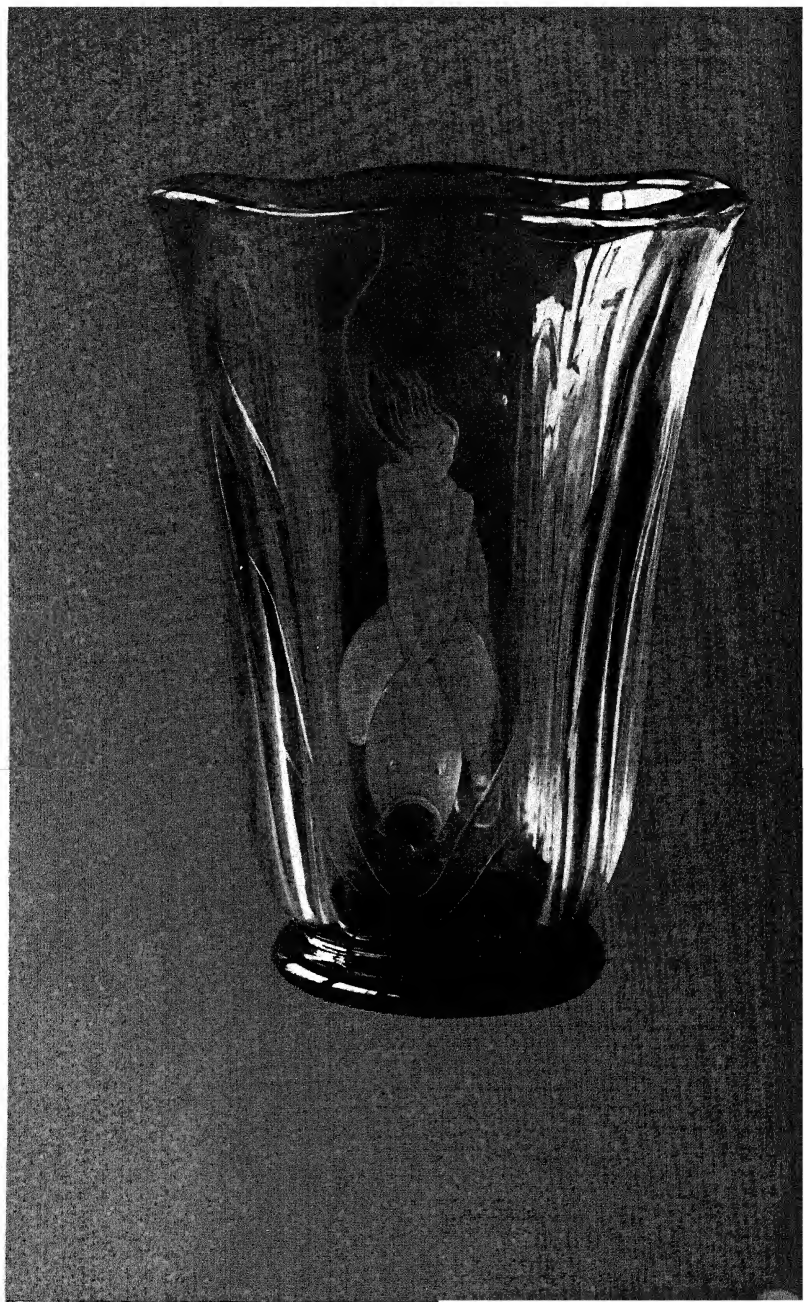
Visual Arts

by a man breathing through the tube. The bubble can be elongated by swinging the tube; it can be transferred to the end of a rod for further working, and pressed into a desired shape, or cut with shears and opened out, waved or crinkled. The most interesting part of the glassblowers' equipment is the chair in which the principal workman sits. It has long, flat arms along which the blowing tube or rod is rolled while the glass attached to it is being worked with the other hand, keeping the vessel circular in cross section, symmetrical about its axis like a pot thrown on the wheel or a piece of turnery. Since they are produced by handicraft the forms will be organic, as we say, active forms, drawn freehand so to speak, felt rather than calculated. Freely blown glass often has a special dynamic quality from the fact that it is forcefully inflated; its forms are tense and swelling, like bubbles about to burst. Pottery thrown on the wheel may have something of the same quality. This second or handworker's method has remained in use until our own day; you can still see it being used at an old-established glassworks near London. But it is now being largely replaced by machine processes, which produce a third type of form. These machine processes depend essentially upon the use of moulds, and in this of course they are not new. The Romans used them at the very start of glass-blowing. But mechanical science has greatly extended their application. The process called pressing, for example—a kind of stamping—was a nineteenth-century invention. It enabled blowing to be dispensed with altogether.

The decoration of glass may be broadly classified in the same way; it may be decorated freehand with plastic work; or it may be treated as a solid material like stone, by the lapidary's method of grinding, and cut or engraved with a pattern, or it may be moulded; in both these last cases the 'living' plasticity of the hot material is ignored. Ancient Egyptian glass was of the lapidary order, in a rather different way, decorated with coloured bands of blue, green, yellow

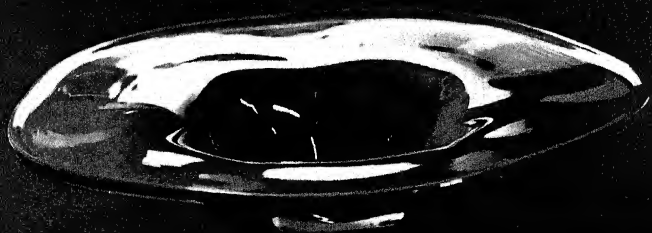


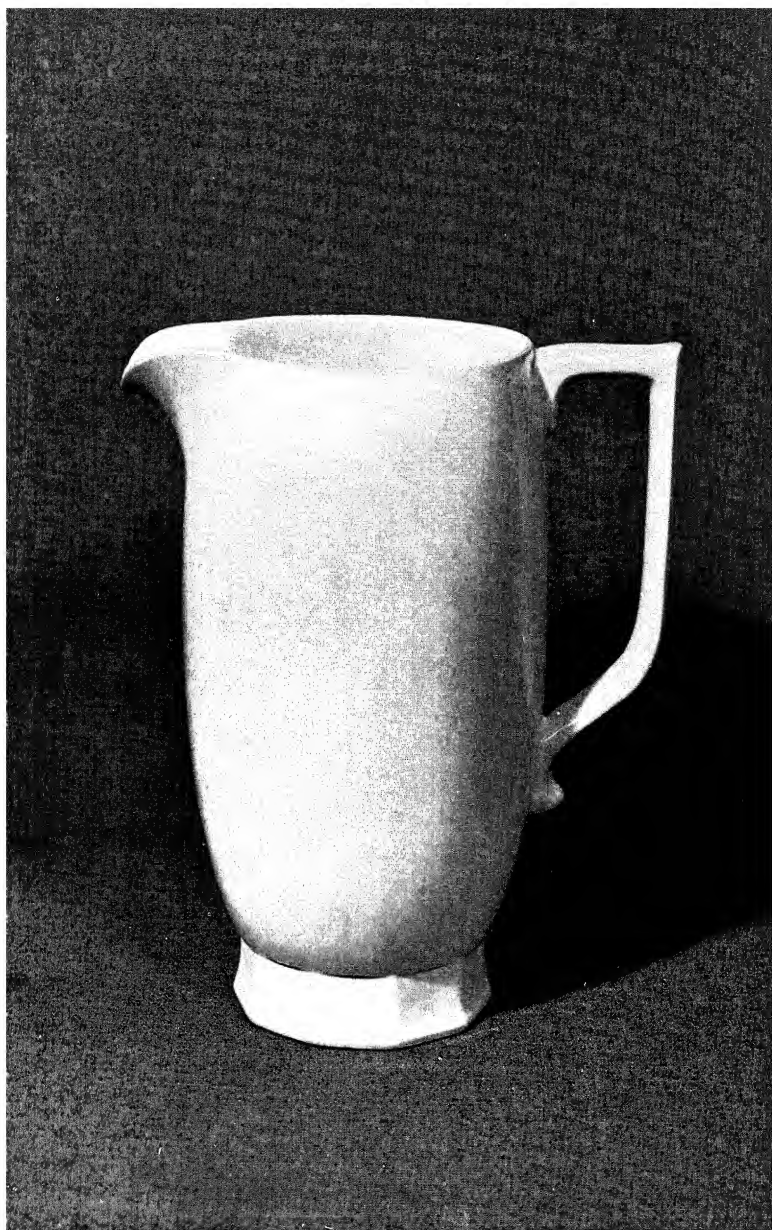
*Stoneware vase made by Bernard Leach:
height, 10½ in. Page 133*



*Glass vase designed by Viktor Lindstrand
(Orrefors): height, 8½ in. Page 134*

*Dish designed and made by Tom Hill
(Whitefriars): diameter, 8 in. Page 134*





*Cream-coloured earthenware jug designed by Keith Murray (Wedgwood):
height, $8\frac{1}{2}$ in. Page 131*

The Art of the Glassmaker

and red, in stylized imitation of turquoise, jasper and other stones. The Egyptians were great makers of coloured glass, and for centuries at Alexandria, beads and glass jewellery and other articles of luxury were made to be exported all over the world. But apart from its use in beads and toys these originally Egyptian techniques of glass-working are now obsolete.

But the Roman art of blowing glass was, and is, of the greatest importance. The traditions it created are still alive to-day. It was rational and functional in the making of objects of use, but less admirable perhaps in luxury wares. I think the Roman taste was most excellent in engineering work not calling itself art, and the quality of the best Roman glass reflects this. Only when he tried to be a patron of art, employing Greeks and Egyptians and Orientals whom he despised, did the Roman citizen's good taste fail and lapse into vulgarity. Almost every technique since employed was at the command of the Roman glassmakers, and in one respect particularly we are reminded of the developments of the present day. Bottles and containers of all sorts were made in great numbers, not only by free blowing but by blowing into moulds, anticipating the modern technique. Admirably proportioned cylindrical and tapering bottles, conical, globular, and four-sided vessels, and many others, were made in this way for liquid merchandise, particularly for cosmetics and fragrant oils. These were decorated, if at all, with the simplest ribbing and waving of surface.

Such work established the basic tradition of Roman and eventually all European glass. Within a century or so of the invention a mature and many-sided art had been created by the craftsmen of the Roman Empire. But how is this ancient art connected with the glass we use at the present day? Between that time and ours came, first of all, a mediaeval period when the traditions of Egypt and Rome were kept alive in the Near and Middle East at the courts of the rulers of Islam. Civilization and the arts flourished there while

Visual Arts

Europe was sunk in barbarism. Not until the Renaissance in Italy was the Roman art of glass recovered, at Venice, and Italian artist-workmen spread it once more all over Europe. This was a time when glass was valued above silver, when the clever Venetians excelled in light fanciful glasses.

It was in order to emulate the Venetians that English makers in the seventeenth century produced the new sort of glass I spoke of just now. By an odd chance it proved to be heavy and brilliant and lent itself admirably to plain, massive forms, as in the beautifully proportioned baluster wine-glasses of the reign of Queen Anne and the first Georges, the finest of all English glass. But its brilliancy brought also the temptation to decorate it too lavishly with cutting. Worse still, this cut decoration was crudely imitated in the nineteenth century and later in moulding by machinery, and this essentially modern use of machinery brings us to the problems of the present day.

The great modern increase in the use of moulds in power blowing and pressing, for the making of bottles and containers and utilitarian glass, brings us back to the Roman mould-blown work I spoke of just now. The same fine qualities could be achieved if only we had a clear grasp of the aesthetic principles involved. The use of machinery here as elsewhere has two aspects—social and aesthetic. In the first place we must remark that it has no necessary connection with commercialism. Properly directed, in responsible hands, it could obviate drudgery and bring security into the lives of a great many people. Mass-production and mechanization could do just that. They could save labour and put useful commodities within the reach of all. In a world where a living has always been desperately hard to get, all that must surely be so much gain in a human sense. Of course you will not agree if you believe that suffering and fear and hardship and insecurity are ennobling. But I don't believe that.

It is tempting to revile the machine as bringing the death

The Art of the Glassmaker

of all fine craftsmanship, but the accusation is not wholly true. A luxury market will in any case remain for the craftsman's productions. From the point of view of the worker it is true that it is a better life to make things with your hands than to mind a machine. Many men and women feel what has been called 'skill hunger', which cannot be satisfied by factory work but calls for the wise use of leisure. You may say, why not then abolish the machine and satisfy that hunger not in leisure only, but in a return to handicraft all round? But that would be like renouncing the tractor, and even the plough, for fear of losing the satisfactions of the gardener.

The aesthetic aspect is equally important. To understand it we must first grasp the essential distinction between hand-work and machine-work, between the unique freehand gesture of the artist-craftsman, creating vital organic forms, on the one hand, and on the other the pre-determined mechanically repeated imparting of form by the machine and the mould. You may say that the latter process cannot produce a work of art at all. But the same would have to be said of some other older arts, among them the printing of books. They are mass-production from a design, and they have their own order of beauty.

Now machine-made glass may embody an equally authentic art. Design for the machine must be chiefly an affair of subtly drawn curves and fine proportions, of interesting colours and textures and simple unfussed surface decorations, such as reeding and fluting. Forms will be static, rigidly determined by the mould, and apart from the excellence and suitability of the design, the merit of the work will be in mathematical precision and delicacy. It is, I think, natural and fitting that design of this sort should incline to plain geometrical forms. Even if not determined by function they have the air of being so, and in this way express the preference of the age. Much modern industrial art, and especially architecture, has shown the same inclination, and

Visual Arts

I have already mentioned the Roman parallels. These also were the work of engineer-architects. Objects so designed would be frankly, almost proudly, machine-made, and the term need have no implication of falsity or sham, except where a mechanical process has been used to imitate the appearance of hand-made work, such as cut decoration in glass. So far it has given us only useful objects, apart from the fake hand-made. I remember such things as certain forms of ovenware, and a great deal of interesting design in bottles, especially perfume-bottles and containers for cosmetics. The same principles apply to all work faithfully reproduced from a blueprint, by hand or by machine. Architecture supplies an almost exact parallel, and it is fitting that several architects have so designed glass. Mr. Keith Murray and Mr. Farquharson have done fine work of this kind which with its cool precision may one day become historic, as typical of the Early Machine Age.

A broad view of the history of art is needed here in face of the machine, if we are to keep our balance and not lapse into despair or denunciation. After all, there are so many kinds of excellence. In the making of glass the procession of styles shows a constantly changing ideal. Familiarity with that fact of change should bring an open mind where all sorts of new work are concerned; and a good way of securing this is to frequent a museum where the whole achievement of a particular art is displayed.

I often wonder why people go to museums, why they think that all sorts of pottery and glass are worth displaying. I find that many of them are inarticulate and simply cannot say. But they do go. I must believe it is out of care for beauty, valued, as music is valued, for its own sake for the pleasure it gives. I cannot believe they go from an interest in history as taught in schools. I refuse to believe that sensible people bother to find out what sort of clothes Shakespeare wore, and what kind of fire-irons were used in Milton's house. They

The Art of the Glassmaker

call this 'imaginative reconstruction'; but only a very dull schoolmaster would insult the word 'imagination' in that way. But there is another kind of historical imagination. It is the sort of historical sense that enables us to see the work of every period and country from its own point of view, to enter without partisanship into the artistic intention of the craftsman. That is the true connoisseurship, and it is a connoisseurship which I think museums should strive to cultivate. For it brings the most various and lasting pleasure.

But how is this pleasure given? The answer is the same as for every other branch of art properly understood. It is a delight in form and colour and texture, in composition and play of line. All these are created by the genius of the artist. Pottery and glass have here an advantage over painting and sculpture. People are willing to accept their forms as abstract creations, not (as they say) 'representing' anything else. There are no will o' the wisps like expression and message and truth to nature to distract us. You do not expect a jug to resemble a natural object. We feel free to enjoy the mystery of form for its own sake. It is a mystery, a wonder that applies to the shape of everything. 'Why is it shaped like that?' we say. Fitness for use does not account for it. And why does it give us pleasure to feel it so? It is all rhythmical, like a dance, and what is the meaning of a dance? Some forms are grave, others are energetic and full of movement. Some forms appear to be powerfully bursting; others are calm and still. Colour is a mystery too. Why do certain harmonies move us so strangely? Every material has its own sort of appeal in colour, and this is especially true of glass and pottery; their colour is translucent, saturated, shining like pebbles seen under water.

Thus glass-making can be shown to be, not an affair of royal factories producing huge and costly display pieces, but the manufacture for the most part of simple useful wares. Yet its products can form a branch of abstract art capable of

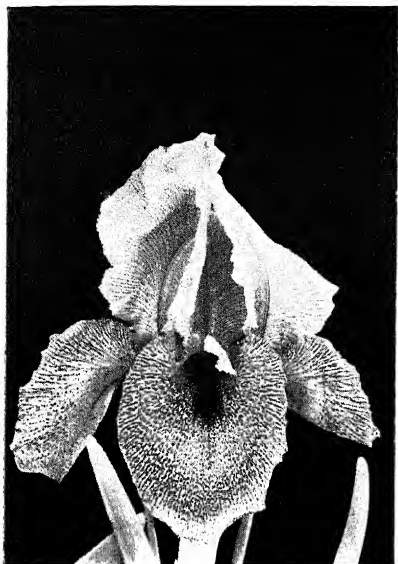
Visual Arts

forms that are truly monumental though only a few inches high. The mystery of form is once more celebrated in them: how mere lines and volumes and colours and textures in a certain relation can move us as deeply as music. Some periods favoured solid architectural compositions, while others preferred sensitive and vital linear fantasies. Some glasses seem to be all surface, insubstantial; others glow with interior light. To get to know all these intimately will certainly give an increasing pleasure, but it will also broaden one's sympathies. The ideal of each period will be found to be right from its own point of view, so to speak.

If we are in this way instructed and have kept our faith in the unfailing creativeness of man as artist, we shall easily accommodate and appreciate a new order of beauty in machine-made glass. Not that the glass of the future will be all machine-made. The handicraft will not die, though its scope will no longer be universal. Its productions should and will take a place beside the individual works of fine art, of sculpture and painting, to which they form a close parallel. All are needed for aesthetic education, which must also be delight. But we should look forward. In an impoverished world especially we cannot afford to reject anything that will save labour. We should regard the new modes of expression as an opportunity for the practice of a new sort of creative art. Thus regarded, the living art of the glassmaker, past and present, will reward us with a wide range of satisfactions.

VI

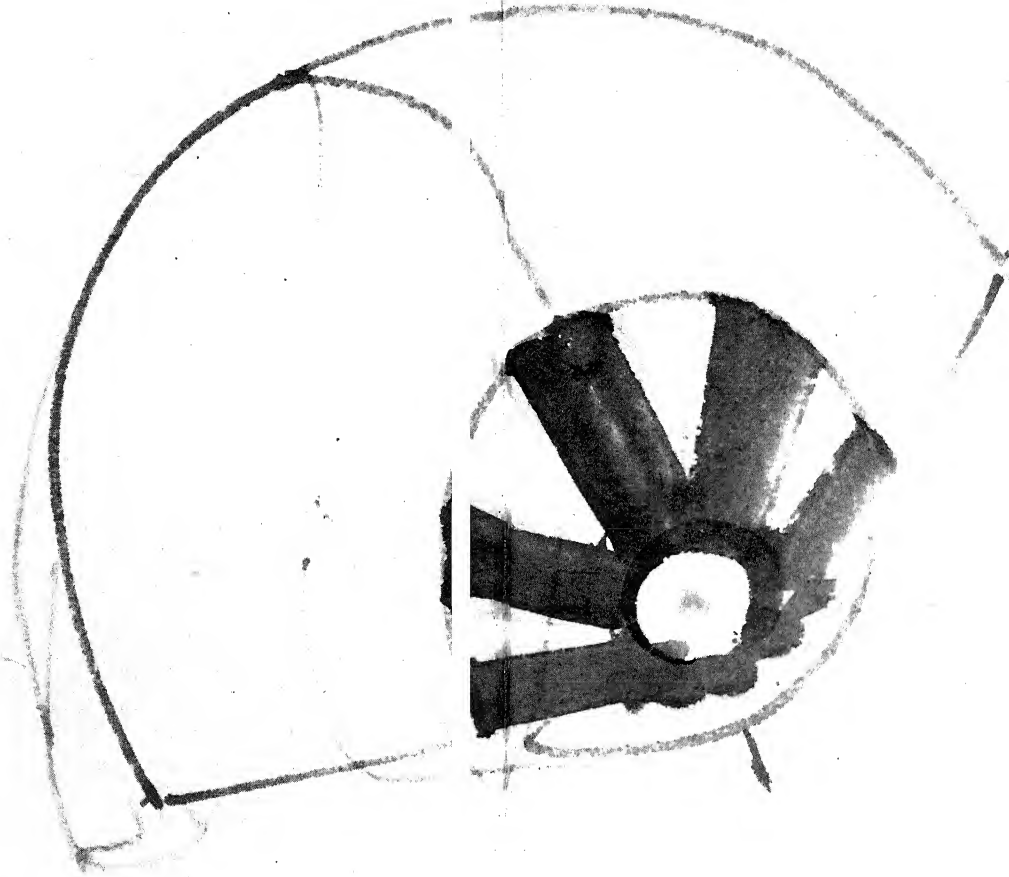
THE THEATRE



*Above, Iris sofarana: below,
Fritillaria imperialis. Page 26*



*Photographs by R. A. Malby
& Co.*





Nijinsky taking a call after 'Le Spectre de la Rose'. Page 148
Photograph by Baron de Meyer

A NOTE ON NIJINSKY AND THE PARADOX OF ACTING AND DANCING

Nearly forty years have passed since the dancer Nijinsky first appeared on the English stage. Since his time, and he performed in this country for little more than four years, the ballet has grown in popularity enormously and a great literature of admiration and interpretation has grown up. But no adequate record or analysis has to my knowledge ever been written about the achievement and significance of the man who was by general consent the greatest dancer and mime of the century.

The art of dramatic and significant movement and gesture on the stage has so wide a range, from purely natural action to the most highly stylized pantomime, even to the inhuman restraint and rigidity of the masked actor or marionette, that it is difficult to generalize or enunciate any comprehensive theory about it. It has some parallels in painting and the visual arts, and like them suffers from the mistaken popular demand for naturalism as the only 'truth'. A consideration of Nijinsky's art, therefore, even after so long an interval, will not only serve as a pleasant reminder to those now middle-aged and elderly enthusiasts who saw him dance, but also, perhaps, provide a contribution to the meagre body of aesthetics relating to the art of the theatre.

★ ★ ★

It has been supposed by persons with a superficial understanding of the nature of truth that all conventions in the arts are bad, and that a periodical 'return to Nature' is required to bring them back to life. But a convention may be like a

The Theatre

symbolic language in which a creative artist may fruitfully express himself. Only when its freshness has disappeared and its symbolic counters have grown smooth and worn does it require to be fertilized afresh by some new or foreign contact, which may be a partial return to naturalism due to some vivid new experience, or the adoption of a new convention.

Now stage dancing normally employs such a symbolic language, and the repertory of steps and movements invented in the nineteenth century by Marius Petipa for the Imperial Russian Ballet was put to splendid use by him in the great Tchaikovsky ballets of his time, of which the greatest of all was the *Sleeping Beauty*. But the ballet of Petipa inevitably grew exhausted. It called for a reformer, who was eventually found in our own time in Michael Fokin, proposing what was regarded as a 'return to Nature'. It was immensely successful both artistically and with the public, and all the new ballets of Diaghilev's first seasons, in which Nijinsky danced, were inspired by Fokin's new technique.

It is said that Fokin was influenced in his reforms by the revived 'Greek' dancing of Isadora Duncan. In this the ballet-shoe was discarded and natural movements were the artist's constant aim. Fortunately Fokin did not go the whole way in this direction. The revived and expressive language he created was used in ten or a dozen masterpieces, which included not only formal ballets, but two 'dance dramas', *Scheherazade* and *Thamar*, in which the new and more flexible technique was put to admirable use. But though his was no sterile naturalism the 'return to Nature' of Fokin's reforms was a step in a dangerous direction, and events proved that it had little or no possibilities of further development. The two 'Greek' ballets in which he attempted to continue his reforms, *Narcissus* and *Daphnis and Chloe*, were the least successful of his whole career.

The fate of those two ballets illustrates particularly well the point I wish to make. Isadora Duncan's barefoot 'Greek' dancing may well have been close to the irrelevant historical

The Theatre

fact. But it was so little different from spontaneous natural movement, so little stylized, as to be hardly a convention at all. It was too 'easy', too formless, ever to be deeply and lastingly effective as art. Fokin's retention in *Les Sylphides* and the rest of much of the classical ballet technique of Petipa and his predecessors left him still with a fruitful convention. His more considerable abandonment of it, first in Tcherepnin's *Narcissus* and later in Ravel's *Daphnis and Chloe*, left him between two worlds, and the result was consequently quite ineffective.

But the other, earlier, Fokin ballets, such as *Sylphides*, were still conventional enough to call for stylized movement and artificial but profoundly significant gesture, and in these Nijinsky's art was made known to us. The memory of his performances brings home distressingly the ephemeral character of all the arts of the theatre. Nothing I can say will convey to one who never saw him Nijinsky's supreme accomplishment. His astonishing technique was the least of his gifts; his *entrechâts six* and his tremendous leaps, when he seemed to float in the air unaccountably, would have been trivial exercises without his sense of phrasing, his mastery of a hundred sorts of rhythm. His dancing was never a series of separate steps but a continuous thing, rhythmical and flowing or deliberately broken, a living sequence of gesture and movement. These qualities were best seen in purely abstract dancing, as in *Sylphides* or the lovely suite of dances to Tcherepnin's perfumed music called *Le Pavillon d'Armide*, which was actually the first Diaghilev ballet to be given in London. His stage personality in his miming was of inexhaustible depth: the *diablerie* of his Harlequin in *Carnaval*, his overpowering romantic grace in the *Rose*, the lithe strength and sensuality of his negro in *Scheherazade*, and the profoundly disturbing wooden pathos of his *Petrouchka*, each creation made him seem a different person. He was by some one called an equivocal figure: he seemed to have no sex,

The Theatre

or rather to be of both sexes. Yet in his art there was nothing of mere sex-appeal. To convey anything of all this to one who never saw him is a vain undertaking, and I will simply affirm that to see Nijinsky merely take a curtain call (and it was nothing unusual for him to be called to the curtain twelve or even fifteen times) was a memorable experience. Other dancers almost equalled him in single parts (Stanislas Idzikowsky was as good as he as Harlequin), but no one had his range or that unfathomable depth of personality which we call genius.

That Nijinsky himself was aware of the emptiness of naturalism was made clear in the ballets for which he composed the dancing. Of the three made for the Diaghilev Company, incomparably the most important was the one danced to the music of Debussy's *Prélude à 'L'après-midi d'un faune'*. It was a bold experiment, anticipating the modern poets and painters in its rejection of all natural grace. Nijinsky is in fact reported to have expressed his conviction on the subject in a memorable aphorism to the effect that *'la Grâce et le Charme sont les ennemis du Beau'*. The ballet was produced in Paris with the choreographer himself in the part of the faun, and a dictum from the author of the poem. Stéphane Mallarmé, was quoted on the programme: *'On devrait danser "L'après-midi d'un faune" au milieu d'un paysage avec des arbres de zinc.'* The conventions of the dancing were derived, as someone perceivingly remarked, from a misunderstanding of Greek vase-painting. But this, of course, did not invalidate them. The two-dimensional character and 'primitive' angularity of the gestures depicted on the pottery were to be used as the basis of the new convention, designed to be as disturbing and evocative in its rigid restraint as are the movements of a puppet or the immobility of a mask. There were moments of tense excitement in Nijinsky's own production which I have missed in recent revivals. The frieze of women with linked arms all in profile had been breathlessly still when

The Theatre

suddenly they broke into a slow undulating movement with an effect of very great beauty. The faun himself was so quiet, so alert and still, that his single leap at the end took one's breath away. As another piece of creative miming it was superb. Nijinsky's later experiment in Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* was less successful; it involved too much of sheer invention and had too little root in tradition, either of the ballet or of actual folk dance, to be fully successful, and later performances left me of the same opinion. One could not help suspecting that Nijinsky had deliberately thought out primitive steps as being suitable to a primitive rite, a too obvious proceeding that was certain to fail.

But Nijinsky's experiments as choreographer, no less than his own performances, are an object lesson in the art of the theatre. Acting to be an art at all must be stylized; if naturalness is required it must be built out of controlled movements, however much they may be sustained by emotion; it is not enough merely to *be* natural. The actor to be an artist must have learnt a craft. A well-known story of the actor Coquelin *ainé* records how he once actually fell asleep on the stage when he should have been acting sleep, and was told afterwards how unnaturally he had acted. There is an instructive comparison to be drawn too between the performance of the same part by a pretty young girl with 'natural charm' and by an actress of, say, forty-five trained as an *ingénue* by the Comédie Française. I never saw Henry Irving, but from accounts I have had of him I have a vivid impression of an unbroken structure of movement, speech and gesture built up by a very highly strung man with the utmost care and deliberation, whose tenuous fabric the least distraction might endanger. It was a dance, a flowing sequence of movement like a dance of Nijinsky's. Such a composition may have nothing to do with the drama which provides its occasion; it may even falsify it. But acting must have this positive creative quality if it is to be an art at all. One side of Mr.

The Theatre

Gordon Craig's case for his *Uebermarionette* was derived from his perception of this quality in Irving's acting; for the rest it was concerned to abolish the destructive intrusion of the actor's personality, with its irrelevant 'expression'; the wretched actor's personality would not be controllable, so he must be masked or even abolished altogether. Yet it is an undue simplification and weakness to wish the actors away. For while there are plays that could be acted by masked players or even by marionettes with immense advantage to their poetic suggestiveness and tragic power, there are so many modes of expression in the theatre that it would be a narrow view to urge the exclusion altogether of all naturalism and the living unmasked actor.

I have elsewhere in this book defined an art as creation in terms of a medium; and the media must not be confused. Thus the exhibition in the music-halls of naked women posed as 'living sculpture' is boring, uncomfortable and even obscene, because of that confusion. Yet a naked woman in natural movement in the same circumstances would not be obscene at all; like that of other animals, her beauty would be named as creation in terms of a medium, in this case a living one. In the theatre, however, the choreographer and the producer of plays have to deal with the living human body and its movements in another sense. In their hands it must be plastic, controlled, subject to a restraining convention which allows movement and tone and gesture to be built into a moving, enchanting, unaccountable sequence, yet does not disdain to employ, however illogically, the resources of an incalculable personality such as Nijinsky's.

VII

THE GARDEN

END OF THE YEAR

Reaching the end of another year the gardener may well be forgiven if a daunting sense of futility overtakes him, a sense of effort endlessly repeated and always lost. However fruitful the year in produce and enjoyment and the fulfilment of plans, there remains the consciousness that most of the work must be done again next year and the next. The stone rolled up the hill so laboriously has reached the bottom and must be rolled up again. Sooner or later, too, all will lapse and be forgotten. No effort can avert the inevitable change, and nothing endures. This mood would be incurably desolating if the objects of the pursuit were indeed a matter of fixed and permanent achievement. But in our clearer-sighted moods we know that they are not. The art of gardening, like the art of life itself, could be described as an affair of design in terms of process, without finality, and not the tidy plan of a static achievement. A first step towards a right and balanced understanding of this matter is to recognize that change and decay and renewal are not only dictated by laws which a realist philosophy must accept, but are conditions upon which our enjoyment of anything whatever actually depends. It is the phantom of an unchanging good life which deludes so many people into wanting the same good things always, to spread their garden pleasures over 'as long a season as possible', even over the whole year. Alternation and change are of the essence of our appreciation of anything, and only a blind graspingness would seek to substitute for them an unalterable and unchanging perfection. Such a perfection is one fears a mirage, and the desire to reach it springs from some defect in our

The Garden

minds. Since nothing endures it is a profound wisdom, in the garden as elsewhere, to accept what comes in passing and be content with that.

But it would be easy to fall into a defence of every sort of evil by such an argument as I have stated. If nothing is known save by a consciousness of its opposite, why attempt to abolish evil? It is the condition of our knowing and valuing the good. But this may be a dilemma of merely verbal origin: both terms in such pairs of opposites need not have a positive existence. Just as dirt is matter in the wrong place, and weeds are plants (sometimes desirable plants) where we don't want them, so evils may be goods that we do not recognize because they are not what we expected or wanted, or they may be merely the name we give to the absence of those expected goods.

Now it is worth while to recall how various and inexhaustible may be the pleasures of a country garden throughout the year—pleasures that are not of a succession of flowers only, but of garden life in all its phases, of bare branch and leaf as well as of flower and fruit. At no stage are the inhabitants of our gardens without a vivid interest to one looking for the right thing with a perceiving eye. Of evil in the sense of a positive outrage on what we call our moral sense, most gardeners must have experience enough, and feel no more compelling duty than to combat it. Waste and wanton destruction, chief sins of Nature itself, must always be abhorrent to a sensitive being, to one conscious of limited time and an ideal of unlimited scope. A member of a race with so much to do to avoid hardship and find a living for all, cannot but be injured by the loss of something it might have used or something upon which one of its number had laboured. It is an injury to the common good, however remote the consequences may seem to the offender. The form of waste that comes from indifference to beauty is more subtle and insidious, but may perhaps be excused as the result of some

The Garden

one's misfortune, save only when it involves the irrevocable destruction of some lovely thing. More terrible is the 'law of Nature' by which all living creatures maintain their existence by preying upon others, by mutual destruction, a law which holds all through the scale of organisms from the lowest to the highest. No realist acceptance of this and all its consequences can ever silence the voice of our moral sense crying out against it. That voice is a divine imperative urging us to substitute co-operation for competition, and no reasoning about the matter can shake our faith in the value of such a judgement. Some may fall back on a blind faith in the ultimate goodness of creation, or be persuaded that the life or spirit of the race is a reality transcending that of the individual, whose separate existence is an illusion. But even if we accepted this we could not but revolt against the cruelty and blundering waste of the evolutionary process in which we and all living creatures are involved. Even a wider solidarity of all living things, hardly guessed at yet suggested by such phenomena as the observed co-ordination between the life of insects and that of the flowers they help to fertilize, cannot comfort us in face of so much suffering. The vision of a divinely imagined order, alternative to nature's cruel struggle, in which creative energies will be expended harmoniously, not warringly, must attract all people of good will. Of such an order beauty is the pattern; it commands the same service, and a garden is its microcosm. For there should be in all garden cultivation a desire for order, a determination to substitute for muddled haphazard competition a plan based upon an ideal, something justified by aesthetic or moral preferences and convictions. Such a love of order in the garden must not be confused with neatness, a mean desire to secure uniformity and cut everything to an arbitrary measure. To allow freedom of growth is an essential part of such orderliness, which seeks to set free the rhythms of life in all their complexity. But all that is wasteful, destructive and

The Garden

jarring must be constantly held in check. To give such a devotion to one's plants, to live to see them flourish under one's care and protection, and come to know them as friends whose individuality one has always respected, is surely reward enough for the good gardener.

Devotion to these things in the larger world is a sacred trust calling for unshakeable fidelity and a patience that can withstand any stroke of ill-fortune, fortified by the conviction that these virtues and this service are divine realities with eternal value. The amount of faithful effort we can make in all this is, we feel, 'the one strictly underived and original contribution which we make to the world': all else, 'our strength and our intelligence, and even our success, are but effects, products, and reflections of the outerworld' dependent upon circumstances and at the mercy of mischance and the malevolence of others. But effort is our own; it 'belongs to a different realm, as if it were the substantive thing which we *are* while those other things are but the externals which we *carry*'. These heartening words of William James come to mind when we consider this baffling and saddening problem of process and effort.

In the management of a garden these virtues and perceptions are called for as much as in the affairs of life usually called serious, and fortunate are those who have this opportunity for the creation of beauty. Here as in the other arts discussed in this book, beauty will not always come as a result of direct striving, as a pleasure consciously and deliberately sought. It will come like a benediction on some practical effort or task, which will be its occasion. Success here, as in all our undertakings, is less an affair of final and positive achievement than the perception of a passing unanalysable rhythm, something no more susceptible of rational statement and explanation than the thrilling pattern woven by a flock of gulls on a winter's morning as they wheel in concert in the sunlight, crossing and following, first one

The Garden

against many, then all together. Only in a figure of this sort can the 'meaning' be stated. In the same way much of the fascination of fountains lies perhaps in a sense that they are a symbol of man's efforts, with their rising and falling, achievement and failure, perpetually sustained.

THE FABER MONOGRAPHS ON
POTTERY AND PORCELAIN

dealing with the ceramic art of all countries and periods. Edited by W. B. Honey. Each volume contains about one hundred plates of which four are in colour. About 21s. each volume.

GERMAN PORCELAIN

by W. B. Honey

EARLY ISLAMIC POTTERY

by Arthur Lane

ENGLISH DELFTWARE

by F. H. Garner

COREAN POTTERY

by W. B. Honey

FRENCH FAIENCE

by Arthur Lane

MEDIEVAL ENGLISH POTTERY

by Bernard Rackham

WEDGWOOD WARE

by W. B. Honey

GREEK POTTERY

by Arthur Lane

NINETEENTH CENTURY ENGLISH

POTTERY AND PORCELAIN

by Geoffrey Bemrose

EARLY CHINESE POTTERY

by Basil Gray

JAPANESE PORCELAIN

by W. W. Winkworth

CHELSEA PORCELAIN

by William King

FRENCH PORCELAIN

by W. B. Honey

LATER CHINESE PORCELAIN

by R. Soame Jenyns

STAFFORDSHIRE POTTERY

OF THE SEVENTEENTH AND

EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

by Bernard Rackham

ENGLISH PORCELAIN

OF THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

by J. L. Dixon

OTHER TITLES TO THE FABER

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY



104 539

UNIVERSAL
LIBRARY